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Toru Toba
Illustration Falmaro
The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt
(Hey, How About Treason?)

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The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt
(Hey, How About Treason?)
Toru Toba | Illustration Falmaro

"How very bold of you to so much as show your face."
"Thank you ever so much for all your help back then."
©Falmaro
Crown Princess of Soljest
Tolcheila
Marquess of Marden
Zenovia

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"What's that fatty doing?! We're already freakin' swamped over heeeeere!"

"Are you here to kill me?"
There was no point asking the boy when he arrived. Nanaki silently stood there as if present all along.
"...Sir Nanaki."
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CONTENTS

The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt (Hey, How About Treason?)

Chapter 1
Hey, How About a Two-Front War?

Chapter 2
Eastern Levetia

Chapter 3
Political Players

Chapter 4
The Will to Retaliate

Chapter 5
The Final Move

Chapter 6
A Test of Skill

Epilogue

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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

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Chapter 1: Hey, How About a Two-Front War?

Chapter 2: Eastern Levetia

Chapter 3: Political Players

Chapter 4: The Will to Retaliate

Chapter 5: The Final Move

Chapter 6: A Test of Skill

Epilogue

Afterword

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Character Profiles

WEIN

Prince regent of the continent's northernmost country, the Kingdom of Natra. A born genius who rescued his nation from many a disaster. Renowned as a benevolent leader but is actually a self-indulgent slacker with everything except personality and looks.

FALANYA

Wein's little sister and the crown princess of Natra. Idolizes her brother and studies tirelessly in hopes of helping him. Made her negotiation debut during the Gathering of the Chosen in the old capital of Lushan. Concerned she might not know her dear brother as well as she thought.

NANAKI

Falanya's guard. A Flahm like Ninym. While not very expressive, he cares deeply for Falanya.

GRUYERE

A mighty figure in the West, he is the king of Soljest and one of Levetia's Holy Elite. Also very fat.

NINYM

Wein's childhood friend and his Heart. Serves as his aide in the public and private sphere. Wishes Wein wouldn't be so reckless. Part of the Flahm, a group that's persecuted in the West.

TOLCHEILA

Crown princess of the powerful Soljest Kingdom in the West. Has a sharp political mind and ambition to match. Tolcheila is intimidated by Falanya's growth despite their similar age and considers the Natran princess her rival.

SIRGIS

Former prime minister of the Delunio Kingdom. He now serves Falanya and aims to put her on the throne.

ZENOVIA

Marquess of Marden and the Kingdom of Natra. Has a tense relationship with Sirgis and Tolcheila thanks to the previous war.

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Chapter 1 | Hey, How About a Two-Front War?

A gentle breeze brushed across the plains, and verdant, young leaves swayed in reply. The sun shone brightly, and no one would have ever guessed the land had been blanketed in silvery snow until just recently.

It was spring.

Although a bit delayed compared to the southern nations, the Kingdom of Natra finally overcame the long winter and welcomed its first new buds.

“Ahhh, what perfect riding weather.”

A young man rode on horseback through a fresh meadow. He was Wein Salema Arbalest, the crown prince of Natra.

“Yes. Such fine days are rare, even this time of year.”

A young woman kept pace just behind Wein on her steed. Her name was Ninym Ralei. Her distinctive white hair and red eyes marked her as Flahm, and she served Wein as an aide.

“We finally caught a break. Better enjoy it while we can.”

Wein flopped against his horse’s back. The beast looked somewhat annoyed but continued lugging its human burden.

“Don’t get too comfortable. Remember, we’re not alone.”

Ninym glanced behind at several guards following on their own mounts. Ninym wished Wein would maintain a more dignified appearance, given his position.

“Yeah, I know. My vassals are already super pissed at me.”

“…True.” Ninym sighed. “Inevitably, that is also the reason for this vacation.”

“C’mon, Ninym. Are you still upset?”

“Of course I am. This was indirectly my fault.” She sighed again, more deeply this time. “Now that you’re Agata’s adopted son, there’s sure to be retaliation…”

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“Your Highness, please be more aware of your position!”

Several days ago, Wein’s chief vassals derided him.

“You are the crown prince of the Natran royal family, a monarchy that has reigned for the last two centuries! Moreover, Your Highness is a descendant of Levetia’s lead disciple, Galeus! No bloodline on this entire continent is more precious!”

The vassals’ pleas were earnest, yet theatrical. Perhaps that’s why Ninym, who stood by Wein’s side, watched them with concern while the prince listened.

“And yet you’ve been adopted by some foreigner! What in the world were you thinking?!”

A nation known as the Ulbeth Alliance sat in the farthest reaches of the West. Its leader, Agata, invited Wein to visit in the winter, and after a series of twists and turns, he adopted the prince as his son.

Adopted. In other words, Wein was legally Agata’s child.

Naturally, this announcement rattled Natra’s royal palace. Nobles within the country often loaned their children to one another as adoptees, and princesses were commonly married off to sovereigns abroad. However, Wein was a crown prince. He was destined to lead Natra someday, and his adoption by a foreign nation was unprecedented.

What about his right to the throne? Was such a thing even allowed? The vassals debated these questions day and night.

“Don’t get so upset. I realize I went too far this time,” Wein said in an attempt to pacify the vassals. “Besides, you already ensured I didn’t break any laws, right?”

“This isn’t about the law!”

Unfortunately, Wein’s comments only fueled the fire, and a man slammed the desk.

It was clear the vassals wished to avoid the trouble of deciding Wein’s punishment should the law fail to save him. Thus, they went to great lengths to ensure he was in the clear.

“Your Highness, although you are only one man, you are also the symbol of Natra! Your lineage is the pride of every citizen! To make light of that fact is to mock Natra! None may disparage Your Highness. Not even yourself!”

“I get what you’re saying, but…”

“I am not the only one who feels this way! I believe I speak for all who serve our great nation!”

“I understand that. However—”

“As our crown prince, Your Highness is too quick to act! I recognize the importance of foreign relations, but there is no need for you to bear everything alone! You should depend more on your vassals!”

“…”

Wein fell silent and turned to Ninym beside him for help. She shook her head in regret, powerless to do anything.

The vassals lectured Wein for several more hours. Then, after determining overwork and excessive responsibility had sparked the crown prince’s recent outburst, they vowed to take his duties upon themselves. The mountain of paperwork on Wein’s desk decreased significantly, and he suddenly found himself with unexpected free time.

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Now, let us return to the present.

“Yep, they are *not* happy campers.” Wein sat down in the meadow and chuckled at the memory.

“This is no laughing matter. The whole palace is on edge.”

Ninym alighted from her horse, and the pair unpacked a picnic set containing a blanket, tea utensils, and simple lunchboxes.

“Well, can’t really say I blame ’em. After all, this was their big break,” Wein said, collapsing on the grass.

“Wein, come over here if you’re going to lie down.”

Ninym patted the blanket she’d laid out. Too lazy to get up, the prince rolled toward her with a deadpan “Wheeeee.”

“Can’t you behave for once? Well, never mind. More importantly, what did you mean?” Ninym asked while preparing tea.

“East or West, Natra has always given the lost a place to call home, right? Conversely, those who find opportunity elsewhere always hightail it out of here. In other words, anyone still in the country has nowhere else to go,” Wein replied.

“As usual, you don’t mince words… So what about it?”

“For those stuck here, the Natran royal family is a comfort. We’ve reigned for two hundred years, which is pretty rare when you look at history.”

Be it a ruler's conceit, a foreign nation's overwhelming might, or natural calamity, countries often collapsed within a couple of centuries. This was likely an inevitable consequence of trying to uphold a system that exceeded the human lifespan. It was also why the Natran royal family's longevity was so notable.

"We're the oldest monarchy on the continent, and Natra's vassals were proud to serve us… But times have changed."

Ninym finally understood what Wein was getting at.

"You mean because of your successes?"

"You got it." Wein accepted a proffered cup of tea. "Natra's been on the rise ever since I became regent. The royal family, whose only real pride was tradition, has gained considerable influence. Our little monarchy used to be a pebble on the road. Now other nations are treating us like a bona fide jewel."

"Naturally, Natra's vassals have been elevated as well. And not just in a monetary sense. They've earned the respect that comes with protecting said jewel."

"Yep. For them, this is nothing less than a fabulous new golden era." Wein grinned.

"And I just kicked our royal clout right in the face."

"…No wonder they're upset."

Wein hadn't merely rained on their parade. He'd thrown every last scrap of joy straight into a bonfire.

He followed this up with another one of his controversial opinions.

"Well, sovereign authority is a sham anyway, if you ask me."

"Wein." Ninym stuffed the bread she'd packed for lunch into his mouth.

"Hurrgh."

"Don't say anything problematic. You never know who's listening," she admonished.

"Hurrrrgh." Wein wolfed down the bread and shrugged. "Yeah, but doesn't everyone know the truth deep down? Anything can be valuable if enough people claim it is. Money is no different. A shared illusion can turn plain old hunks of metal into currency and decide which nobodies get to be aristocrats and royals."

"…"

"But some will lay down their lives for that stuff. Isn't it crazy, Ninym?"

"My position does not allow me to challenge royalty."

"But we're off duty right now."

"…" Ninym fell silent, eventually sighing. "Yes, I've had similar thoughts. I also feel the veneration of lineages is altogether pointless. However, the truth is

most people treasure those illusions. Against such opposition, we're nothing more than leaves in a storm. In fact, your vassals' dedication to their mirage is the very reason we're now on this leisurely stroll."

"Well, I'm cool with whatever if it means less work for me."

"I thought you might say that," Ninym replied through narrowed eyes. "But at this rate, the country will likely head in a direction that contradicts your plan. Aren't you the least bit worried?"

"Yeah, it's a legit concern," Wein agreed despite his relaxed expression. "Still, I can't help but wonder if they'll even manage to get that far."

"What do you mean?"

"Now that those guys have gotten a convenient taste of power, the world will be much better off if they have sufficient introspection to grow up and take responsibility."

Ninym's troubled expression exposed her worry. "I understand your point, but your method still feels excessively ruthless. Those people are still your vassals."

"Call it 'objectivity.' I wouldn't be surprised if a messenger showed up in the next few minutes and begged me to come back."

"I should think they'd want to hold out a while longer."

Wein paused, though only briefly. "Wanna bet on it? If I win, you have to end every sentence with *meow*."

"Breaking out an old bit, I see."

"Gotta give it some sunshine now and then, right?"

"Very well. Then if I win—"

"Your Highness!" Wein and Ninym turned around and saw a messenger galloping toward them from across the meadow. The two exchanged a glance.

"What was that about winning?"

"…Nothing, *meow*." Ninym sighed in defeat.

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That same day, Natra's crown princess, Falanya Elk Arbalest, visited the detached royal villa. Willeron Palace was the royal family's primary residence, and as the seat of government, it knew constant foot traffic. The villa was thus built as a quiet getaway. Excluding emergencies, only the royal family, necessary staff, and several high officials were permitted entry. With just a single step, one entered a silent space seemingly frozen in time.

And for the past several years, it had been a site of recuperation for a certain individual.

“How about here, Father?”

Falanya placed fresh flowers by the window as spring sunshine flowed into the room.

“Yes, that’s good. The wind will carry their fragrance,” replied a voice from the chamber’s center.

A man in the prime of life lay in bed. He vaguely resembled Wein and Falanya, and this was no coincidence. Owen was their father and Natra’s convalescent king.

“Ah, what a gentle spring scent. You picked these out yourself, didn’t you?”

“Of course. They’ll brighten up your room, Father.”

“I’m fortunate to have such a thoughtful child.”

Owen smiled at his dear daughter, but it felt tired. His body couldn’t muster a full grin.

Father…

Owen had been delicate since birth, and his health worsened after an abrupt change in climate several years ago. The king had relinquished his government duties to Falanya’s older brother, Wein, to spend his time recuperating. However, his current appearance made it painfully obvious he was still far from well.

“Don’t frown so, Falanya.”

Her face must have betrayed her emotions. Falanya straightened up, and Owen’s next words were gentle.

“I’m honestly doing well. I’m growing more able to walk, and I’m sure I’ll stand before our people again someday. Besides, I refuse to die before your wedding day. My Myrabelle, my dearly departed wife, would be furious if I didn’t bring word of the ceremony.”

Anyone could tell Owen was putting on a brave front. Nonetheless, Falanya refused to snub her father’s kind efforts.

“…He-he, you’re right. I have to become a bride so I can watch you burst into tears.”

“That’s already a given. I might not look it, but I cry at the drop of a hat.”

The two exchanged small grins.

“Well then,” Owen said. “What shall we discuss today? Last time I recounted how Myrabelle and I fell in love.”

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During Falanya's visits, she usually shared her day-to-day life, while Owen recounted his own public and private history. The princess always came with something fresh and exciting to talk about, but as a bedridden king, Owen was running dry of topics.

As he pondered what to discuss next, Falanya made a request.

"Please tell me more about Wein, Father."

"Wein?" he asked in surprise. "Needless to say, you understand him just as well as I do."

"I… I thought so. The people and I praise him as kind," she said. "But I've recently wondered if maybe the Wein I know is only one part of him. I've investigated all his political moves since becoming regent, hoping to learn his motives…"

"And you've seen a side of Wein you didn't expect?"

Falanya nodded.

At first glance, Wein's tactics appeared to have the nation's best interests at heart. However, more digging revealed cutthroat choices that disregarded the citizens' well-being. Of course, Falanya had no intention of condemning Wein over this. Still, his precise, analytical methods, capable of calculating even others' emotions, cut a stark contrast against the compassionate brother the princess knew.

"That is why I wish to know what you think of him, Father."

"Hmm…" Owen mused as he observed his daughter's earnestness. "Before I answer, let me ask one thing. If I share my opinion, what will you do with it, Falanya?"

"Huh…?"

Falanya stared in surprise, for she was caught off guard.

Owen clarified. "You're aware that people are multifaceted, correct? Wein is no exception. In other words…That's all there is to it. Even if he's hiding a fierce nature, that doesn't mean his love for you is a lie. Why exactly are you so fixated on this?"

"W-well, I—"

She scrabbled for an answer.

Why?

Her father's question forced her to recognize that she lacked an answer. What *was* Falanya after? Initially, she delved deeper to confirm her brother's good heart.

"I'm not going to criticize Wein. I'll help if you're concerned, but that may

change if you plan to use the information against him."

"…"

Owen seemed to be admonishing Falanya, and she fell into thought.

As she came to understand her brother, his mysterious figure became clearer. It was like peering into an abyss that chilled Falanya to the core. However, this research was never meant to challenge him. There was another reason, one she couldn't put into words.

Wein is kind. He loves his people and nation. Falanya told herself this to ward against anxiety that would otherwise consume her.

But if, by some chance, that *wasn't* the case…

A servant entered the room.

"Please excuse me for interrupting your pleasant chat. Princess Falanya, Prince Wein has called for you. It's urgent, so he requests that you hurry."

"Wein did?"

Falanya's brother couldn't have overheard the discussion, but it was a surprise to be summoned by the topic of conversation himself.

"It must be quite important. You should get going, Falanya."

"Oh, um…"

"What's wrong? We can resume this anytime."

At Owen's insistence, Falanya agreed to leave. She bowed to her father and scurried out of the room.

He watched her leave, then murmured to himself in the quiet chamber, "My opinion of Wein?" he considered this with some consternation. "What do I say? 'He's a dragon in human form'?"

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"…An invitation to a ceremony in Delunio?"

Falanya, back in Wein's palatial office, tilted her head.

"Yeah. A messenger stopped by a little while ago," the prince replied from the chair opposite her. Ninym stood next to him, holding Delunio's missive. "The ceremony will celebrate the second anniversary of our alliance."

The Delunio and Soljest kingdoms lay to the west of Natra. Previously, a trade conflict and growing concern over Natra's rapid progress prompted Delunio to ally with Soljest and conspire to attack the northern nation. However, Wein's tactics foiled their plans, and total responsibility was placed upon the ringleader, the prime minister of Delunio. He fell from power, and the three

countries later reconciled in a loose alliance.

"The ceremony itself isn't unusual, but I doubt they just want to celebrate," Wein explained. "Falanya, what do you think Delunio is after?"

Falanya briefly mulled over her brother's question. "To demonstrate the strength of the alliance both domestically and abroad?"

Wein nodded. "You got it. If Delunio holds a ceremony with all three representatives, it'll renew the citizens' faith in the alliance and deter foreign threats… Anything else?"

"Huh? Umm…"

Wein often tested Falanya with questions but rarely demanded further clarification once she found the correct answer. The princess's mind spun in a frenzy.

"I'll give you a hint. Try comparing Delunio's current situation to Natra's and Soljest's."

"Its current situation…"

This query would have stumped Falanya not long ago. However, the political opportunities Wein provided allowed her to mentally compare Natra, Delunio, and Soljest and reach a conclusion.

"By hosting the ceremony, they want to make a name for themselves within the alliance?"

Wein grinned. "Exactly. Sharp thinking, Falanya." She beamed at her brother's praise. The prince looked at his little sister as he continued. "Natra has been on the rise the past few years, and Soljest is as strong as ever. Delunio, by comparison, is falling behind. No, to be honest, it's been going downhill since the last prime minister's exile."

"…"

Falanya scrunched her face. She had a vague inkling why, and Wein knowingly proceeded without comment.

"Their villainous prime minister pulled the strings before, but now the king and his vassals can take their newfound authority and normalize the nation… In a perfect world, anyway. Unfortunately, governance isn't so easy. From what I've heard, the king listens to his new prime minister blindly, and this one is pretty terrible at his job."

"…And that's why they need to hold a ceremony."

The alliance with Natra and Soljest kept Delunio afloat. If Delunio aspired to maintain the status quo, neither neighbor could overshadow it. This ceremony was part of their strategy.

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“Now, here comes the real issue,” Wein began. “We could decline the invite if we want to snub the three-way accord, but Natra has no plans to break things off yet. So I figure we play along. The problem is… My vassals will give me a piece of their mind again if I try to leave now.”

“Ah… You mean…” Falanya heard about Wein being adopted by Ulbeth’s representative Agata. She also knew the vassals weren’t too happy about it. Knowing that, Wein had obviously called Falanya here because…

“Yes. I’d like you to attend the ceremony in my place, Falanya.”

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Preparations for departure began immediately. Acting on Wein’s behalf was a significant task, but Falanya’s previous achievements silenced any complaints from the vassals. Soon enough, a carriage and delegation were ready, and the details for the stay in Delunio were finalized without incident.

Then, in the blink of an eye, the day arrived.

“Princess Falanya. It’s almost time to depart, so I shall perform one last check.”

“Thank you, Sirgis. Please do.”

“I shall return.”

Falanya watched her subordinate bow reverently from the corner of her eye. She stepped into the carriage and lightly plopped on a cushioned seat.

“…This feels so strange,” she mumbled.

“What does?” asked Nanaki, the young guardsman who boarded after her. His white hair and red eyes were evidence of his Flahm lineage.

“Leaving Wein here and visiting a foreign country on my own. I’m usually the one seeing him off.”

“He watched you leave when you went to Mealtars, right?”

“That’s true, but still…”

Falanya had visited the central merchant city of Mealtars in Wein’s stead, but she insisted that felt different.

“…Well, we never would’ve expected him to depend on you regularly a few years ago.”

“You’re right. This has always been my dream, but to think I’d be appointed as a foreign emissary so soon…”

In truth, there was another reason Falanya felt odd.

I’m really happy.

She still had questions about her brother, but his praise and trust delighted her nonetheless.

Falanya didn't think that was a contradiction. She loved and admired Wein from the bottom of her heart.

Oh… Come to think of it, I forgot to ask Father about Wein.

She'd been so busy preparing for the journey that it slipped her mind. Still, she couldn't rush over to the villa and ask Owen now. Wein had given her a vital duty to fulfill.

"What's wrong, Falanya?"

"It's nothing. I was thinking about how I want to do a good job."

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“Looks like you’ve grown up in more ways than one,” Nanaki replied quietly.

“‘Grown up…’ Am I…”

Falanya glanced down at her own body. Now a young lady, she had blossomed wonderfully in the past several years.

“…still growing?”

“…”

Nanaki silently looked away. Falanya grabbed a cushion next to her and threw it at him.

Ninym watched the carriage grow more distant from the office window. When it finally disappeared, she turned back to Wein.

“You’re not panicking this time.”

As Ninym said, Wein was calmly looking over paperwork from his chair. Normally, he would’ve been freaking out. Why the sudden change?

“It’s a ceremony in an allied nation, not hostile negotiations. Plus, she did great in Mealtars. Falanya will be just fine.”

The princess’s recent actions were splendid. Although Wein’s genius couldn’t be denied, he was still one man. Not even he could deal with all the country’s issues. He never missed a chance to give Falanya some experience as his proxy; perhaps those efforts were finally bearing fruit.

“I plan on giving her even bigger tasks from now on. Something this simple will be a walk in the park. I’m sure she’ll come home a winner.”

“…”

Wein’s genius didn’t require the help of others in most situations, so he hardly depended on anyone. Even when forced to team up, he usually had a Plan B in the event of failure.

His poised comments were obvious proof of his hope and faith in Falanya.

“…He-he.”

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Ninym intended to secretly relay Wein’s words to Falanya once she returned home. Undoubtedly, the princess would be pleased.

“Well, at any rate, it looks like I’ve earned myself a little more vacation time.”

Wein tossed the reports he’d been checking onto his desk. There would typically be a mountain of paperwork, but today offered only a modest pile.

Although the vassals had hastily called upon Wein to help with Delunio's sudden invite, they still intended to take care of business themselves.

"That's true. Even so, we should be ready if something happens in Delunio."

"No sweat. We just need some troops on standby while I leave the paperwork to my subordinates and watch everything unfold. For now, I'm nothing but a seat warmer…"

Just then…

"Pardon me, Your Highness!"

There was a frantic knock at the door, and a government official came in to deliver his report. Visceral suffering came through in his voice.

"A messenger from Princess Lowellmina has arrived! Signs of civil unrest are igniting in the Earthworld Empire…!"

Wein and Ninym exchanged a look.

"…Wein."

The young prince sighed heavily at the rattled courier's news.

"Well, looks like we've got a war in the East *and* the West."

Chapter 2 | Eastern Levetia

The Delunio Kingdom's geography had been problematic since its earliest days. The country was located within the central western continent and, as a prosperous trade route, lacked for nothing. However, this also explained why several of its neighbors were an ever-present threat. The mighty Soljest Kingdom sat to the north, and the ambitious Cavarin was in the east. Even Velancia to the south couldn't be underestimated.

No matter how profitable these nations were for business, wondering for countless days when or if they would invade was a heavy burden. If only Delunio had a genius prince, he could have goaded them into destroying one another. Sadly, the royal family was blessed with no such prodigy, and years of boosting the military's defense and fortifying against potential threats formed a heap of bills.

It was then that Delunio's prime minister gained prominence and approached the Teachings of Levetia. The religion had old, deep roots in the West, but he actively evangelized in Delunio and drew the attention of priests and temples alike. The citizens opposed this, however, since it was tantamount to siding with Levetia.

Nevertheless, their protests faded soon enough. This was undoubtedly thanks to the drastic decrease in foreign pressure aided by the previous prime minister's political prowess and Delunio's affiliation with Levetia.

"Levetia's influence in the West cannot be overstated, and I tried to keep our neighbors in check by deliberately falling under their protection. This would allow me the spare time and military funds to deepen our relationship, become a Holy Elite, and guarantee Levetia's patronage… That's what I hoped, anyhow," said the relatively young man in the room.

His name was Sirgis. He was Falanya's vassal and, yes, Delunio's former prime minister.

“As Natra grew, I could no longer afford to rest on my laurels. Unhampered by Levetia’s influence, it targeted Delunio, whose sole protection was the church. You already know the events that followed. Believing we were doomed, I allied with Soljest and plotted to subdue Natra…”

This scheme ended in disaster. Wein’s tactics drove Sirgis from power and forced him into exile. When every other nation denied him refuge, the ex–prime minister used his few remaining contacts to head east and partly sink into hiding.

Then Falanya appeared and asked him to serve her.

“I see. So that’s what happened…” Falanya muttered from her chair across the way. She knew of Wein’s victory over Sirgis, but this was her first time hearing about the former prime minister’s political maneuvers. Falanya’s emotions clashed as she considered a future where Natra never rose to power and Sirgis became a Holy Elite.

“Please, do not concern yourself. On my way to becoming prime minister—and even long after—I overthrew my fair share of opponents. I derided each as incompetent and lauded my actions as righteous.”

This time, it was he who was ousted. Sirgis mocked himself and the simplicity of it all.

“More importantly, Your Highness should focus on the ceremony.”

“…Yes, you’re right.”

Falanya peered out the window to the unfamiliar townscape beyond. They were in Delunio’s capital of Liddell.

“I’m glad we arrived safely, but the real work starts now.”

The delegation’s journey from Natra to Delunio was brief and incident-free, and it was lodging in a manor readied in anticipation of the visit.

“Hey, Sirgis, what kind of person is Delunio’s King Lawrence?”

“He’s your typical puppet monarch. During my tenure, the king possessed no talent or resolve and followed his vassals’ advice to the letter. I hear that hasn’t changed,” Sirgis replied. “Delunio’s current prime minister, Mullein, is the one who proposed the ceremony.”

“He’s your successor, right? What can you tell me of Sir Mullein?”

“He’s my former subordinate. Mullein didn’t hold much promise as a leader but was strong-willed and highly ambitious. I made excellent use of him. As for the man’s character… He treats the king as a marionette, same as I did. I believe that’s answer enough.”

Falanya mulled this over. “I suppose this won’t be easy…I wonder how he’ll behave.”

“Although you are royalty, Princess Falanya, I’m afraid Prince Wein outranks you as a foreign diplomat. Mullein will interpret your arrival as a message that Natra wishes to continue the alliance but doesn’t intend to progress things. He’s correct in that regard, and our best course of action is to avoid needless promises.”

“Shouldn’t they be careful, too?”

“Yes. For Delunio, it was enough that Natra’s royal family accepted the invitation. Those in charge wish to conclude the meeting without incident rather than chase greed. However, there is something that concerns me.”

“What?” Falanya questioned.

Sirgis gestured toward the window.

“Princess, what do you think of Liddell?”

“Huh? It seems like a normal, lively town…” Falanya tilted her head, wondering where this conversation was going.

Sirgis nodded. “As you say, it’s a bustling city. That hasn’t changed since my time as prime minister. However, please keep Delunio’s present situation in mind.”

“Current situation…? Ah,” Falanya gasped. “Are you saying the mood is… strange?”

Most people of Natra thought Delunio was on its last legs, but the atmosphere in Liddell didn’t feel that way at all.

“Of course, this is the nation’s capital. It’s possible Liddell hasn’t felt the impact yet, or maybe the city is putting up a strong front. Undoubtedly, Delunio wishes to avoid appearing on the decline, especially where foreigners are involved. However, I’m worried all is secretly well.”

“…Do you suspect another nation of supporting Delunio?”

“If Delunio does collapse, Natra and Soljest will take it for themselves. I cannot speak in absolute terms… However, some party may be aiding Delunio to prevent the other two nations from gaining unreasonable power.”

“Then we can’t let our guard down.”

Falanya’s features tightened. This was an unexpected wrinkle, but she had no room for fear. Wein appointed her as his representative because he trusted she could handle this sort of trouble.

“I expect we’ll have the opportunity to observe things at the ceremony. I cannot accompany you, but you’ll have dependable company should anything happen.”

Falanya nodded, then joked, “Now that we’ve made it into the country,

maybe you should wear a mask and come along? No one would ever know."

Sirgis's banishment was still in effect, and although he was reluctant, Falanya convinced him to join the delegation as someone with expert knowledge of the Delunio Kingdom.

"Our host is aware that I serve you, Princess Falanya. Delunio does not want to displease Natra, so it's unlikely it will cause much trouble… But it will have no choice but to intervene if I act too suspiciously. Please allow me to excuse myself as we discussed."

The civil response forced Falanya to abandon her proposal.

"I understand," she replied, straightening up. "I have to introduce myself tomorrow before the ceremony, so I think I'll turn in for today."

"Yes. Rest well." Sirgis bowed as the princess left the room. Once her figure was out of sight, he let out a small sigh. "I never imagined I'd return for something like this."

Sirgis looked out the window. The sights were fresh to Falanya, but he'd seen them a million times before.

"Delunio… My homeland…"

He surveyed the world beyond the glass for a long while, conflicted.

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The next day, Falanya paid a scheduled visit to the royal palace in the heart of Liddell.

"…I'm so nervous," she mumbled while being led down a grand hallway.

This was a foreign country, and her brother wasn't around to help. It wasn't the first time, but Falanya's apprehension persisted.

"I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I feel the same," a slightly older girl beside the princess whispered.

She was Zenovia Marden, the former crown princess of Marden who, after the fall of her nation and several other twists and turns, declared vassalage to Natra and became the marquess.

"I can relax in my domain because I have a host of vassals with me… Foreign delegations are quite nerve-racking, aren't they?"

The Marden territory faced Natra to the west and had been involved with Delunio and Soljest since its kingdom days.

And now Zenovia was escorting Falanya's delegation.

"This won't do at all. I need to pull myself together." Falanya lightly slapped

her cheeks.

Zenovia threw her a smile. “Fear not. You are already suited to the task, Princess Falanya.”

“You really think so?”

“The decisions of those in our positions impact countless lives. It would be more concerning if you never gave that consideration. A bleeding heart aware of one’s responsibility and a steadfast will committed to duty are signs of a true politician.”

“…You may be right. Thank you, Zenovia.”

“You’re very welcome. By the way, I’d like to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

Zenovia’s lips drew close to Falanya’s ear so their guide wouldn’t overhear.

“I hear Sir Sirgis has joined your party… Is it true?”

“Yes. He’s here with me, though it’s best if he remains hidden.”

A troubled look crossed Zenovia’s face, and Falanya realized something.

“Previously, you two…”

“Yes, it feels a bit like fate.”

Back when Sirgis was prime minister, he teamed up with Soljest to challenge Natra and used the Marden territory as a stepping stone.

“Of course, we both serve Natra now. I have no intention to dredge up the past, but…”

Despite her official stance, Zenovia’s expression made it clear she had a bone to pick.

“I’ll ask him to give you space whenever possible, but please try to remain calm if you run into each other.”

“I appreciate your kindness,” the marquess replied. She hung her head with a wry smile. “Admittedly, I’m not so disgruntled that I’d avoid him to spare myself the risk of unpleasant feelings. If I carry reservations for anyone, it’s…”

Zenovia trailed off midsentence, and her eyes narrowed.

Wondering what was amiss, Falanya followed her gaze and spotted a group approaching from the opposite end of the corridor. A girl around the princess’s age stood at the forefront.

“Oh my, what’s this? Well met, Princess Falanya.”

The newcomer laid eyes on them and immediately broke into a smile, a veil to conceal the vicious beast lurking behind.

Falanya eyed the other girl and responded carefully. “Princess Tolcheila… What are you doing here?”

King Gruyere, monarch of fellow alliance member Soljest, had a first-born son and second-born daughter. This girl was the latter, Tolcheila.

"'What,' you ask? As vacuous as ever, I see," she answered. "I'm attending the ceremony, so I've come to give my salutations to our host, King Lawrence. Still, I must admit I never expected our paths to cross like this, Princess Falanya. Hmph, I suppose that means I shan't meet Prince Wein this time. How very unfortunate."

Was Tolcheila in Delunio on behalf of King Gruyere and Soljest, just as Falanya attended for Wein and Natra? A part of her understood the girl's disappointment over Wein's absence.

"Stay on your guard, Princess Falanya," Zenovia whispered. "I hear Princess Tolcheila has been active in politics lately and often serves in King Gruyere's stead."

"Really?"

"Yes. In addition to serving as an ambassador to Delunio, she also mediated disputes between important nobles, announced a partial tax reduction, and volunteered to be a liaison between Soljest and Levetia… Not satisfied to remain a substitute, it seems she's trying to displace the crown prince and the king."

"'Displace…'"

Zenovia's explanation erased any sympathy Falanya might have felt. When Soljest and Natra agreed on an alliance, Tolcheila came to the northern nation as both an exchange student and a partial prisoner, although she remained essentially free to do as she liked. Then she abruptly scampered back to her homeland one day, becoming a hostage in name only. To think this was what she'd been up to.

Was Tolcheila in Delunio as more than a mere substitute? Perhaps as the leader of Soljest?

Falanya didn't know enough to make the call.

"Hmm?" Tolcheila's eyes fell on Zenovia. "Ah, I was curious who your companion might be. Now I see it's the former Marden princess. How very bold of you to so much as show your face despite your humiliation. I suppose you must be shameless indeed. No one could possibly sell out their own country otherwise."

Falanya felt the marquess's rage meter explode.

"Yes… It's been quite some time, Princess Tolcheila. Thank you ever so much for all your help back then," Zenovia said with a smile and a bow. Her icy composure was more terrifying than any blatant display of anger. "However, I

fear I cannot match your impudence, Princess Tolcheila. To see you appear in public after a crushing defeat at the hands of Prince Wein is nothing short of inspiring."

Eek! Falanya cried internally.

The sparks flying between Zenovia and Tolcheila were palpable, and an overwhelming tension choked the hallway. Falanya was no great fan of the Soljest princess, but "rocky" couldn't begin to describe Tolcheila and Zenovia's relationship.

From Zenovia's perspective, Soljest was a traitorous nation that abandoned Marden in its time of need, despite the amity between the two countries.

Tolcheila, on the other hand, believed Zenovia to be nothing more than a self-destructive, worthless remnant of the lost Marden Kingdom.

It feels like they're being extra nasty to each other, though…

In Falanya's experience, Tolcheila never lost her composure. Regardless of any disdain she carried for Zenovia, the princess didn't seem the sort to openly scorn the Marquess of Natra.

Does she hate Zenovia…? No, that's not it…

It was impatience. Yes, Tolcheila was irritated about something. And although she was the one stirring up trouble, her mind wasn't on Zenovia. Rather, her focus also seemed to be…

"What's going on here?!" demanded a new voice. A man came into view and raced down the hallway toward them.

"…Ah, Sir Mullein. It's been an entire minute since I last saw you," Tolcheila greeted, bored.

Mullein? That's the current prime minister of Delunio.

In other words, he was the man who had taken the reins after Sirgis's downfall. His distress at the situation didn't evoke any great sense of dignity or competence.

"The young lady over there… You are Princess Falanya of Natra, I presume? Princess Tolcheila, do you have some quarrel with her?"

"Why, we're old acquaintances. We ran into each other and were enjoying a pleasant chat."

Mullein scowled at Tolcheila, but the princess brushed him off with a tired wave.

"Well then, I must bid you farewell… Let us meet again at the ceremony, Princess Falanya."

With these parting words, Tolcheila and her entourage departed. On her way

out, she shot Falanya a tenacious look.

"…"

Once the group was out of sight, Mullein coughed.

"I deeply apologize for allowing such an unceremonious encounter."

"Please, think nothing of it. As Princess Tolcheila said, we were having a lovely conversation."

Falanya looked over and saw that Zenovia had regained her composure. There was no telling what would've happened if the situation continued to escalate.

"Well then, allow me to introduce myself properly. I am Mullein, the prime minister of Delunio." He gave a reverent bow. "I shall escort you. Right this way, Princess Falanya."

"Thank you, Sir Mullein." Falanya and Zenovia set off again, now under Mullein's guidance.

Their attendants felt the tension ease somewhat after their dicey run-in with Tolcheila, but it was too early to relax. The delegation's main objective, an audience with the king, was still ahead. And although he didn't look the part, Mullein was still the man who climbed his way to prime minister.

Falanya realized that, despite Mullein's humble demeanor, his eyes were busy shrewdly sizing her up.

Keep it together.

Falanya steeled herself again, mentally smacking her cheeks.

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"Thank you for traveling all this way from Natra. I welcome you, Princess Falanya. You as well, Marquess of Marden," greeted a man on a throne in the audience hall. He was Delunio's King Lawrence.

"It's an honor to meet you, King Lawrence. I am delighted to celebrate our continued alliance together. On behalf of my father, Owen, please accept my sincerest gratitude."

Falanya delivered her message as Natra's representative. She was still a girl of tender years, yet Delunio's attending vassals admired her noble poise.

King Lawrence, on the other hand, was a jittery mess. "Y-yes… Well, we should talk about the ceremony schedule…Mullein."

"Yes."

After a courteous exchange, Mullein stood beside Lawrence and explained

the ceremony's proceedings. This was only a formality, though, since almost everything had already been decided.

However, it provided Falanya a chance to observe Lawrence.

He was a young king, older than her, of course, but he looked to be in his thirties or forties. Unlike Falanya's father, Lawrence had an undeniable flakiness about him.

The king hasn't said much, and he's been fidgeting this whole time…

Wein once told Falanya that a king's silence was part of his arsenal. Dialogue was the backbone of communication, but there was always a risk of giving too much away. Sometimes, it was best for a ruler to keep quiet and preserve a noble air of mystery rather than speak and invite unwelcome exposure and scorn.

Lawrence's silence and restless gaze weren't noble or mysterious. Falanya looked over at Zenovia and recognized how exasperated she was by the king's behavior.

Lawrence's vassals offered no help whatsoever, ignoring him as though this were an everyday occurrence, which only made this worse. Falanya recalled how Sirgis had called the king a puppet monarch.

Even so…

Falanya felt sympathy for the man, not contempt.

She could serve as a delegate in a foreign nation because she'd studied for long hours every day to support her brother. But what if she hadn't? If Falanya had remained under Wein's protection and let herself be coddled by vassals, she likely would've ended up like King Lawrence.

When she thought of it that way, she felt it was wrong for her to criticize him.

Above all else, Falanya understood Lawrence's expression. He was trying to figure things out but floundering powerlessly. She knew that feeling and related to the king's anguish.

"—That is the plan for the ceremony. Do you have any questions?"

Mullein concluded his explanation while Falanya's mind raced. She mulled for a moment, but not over the query presented to her.

It was likely arrogant and meddlesome of her. From a political standpoint, she was better off leaving this alone. However, if King Lawrence wished for the opportunity to change…

"No, and thank you for confirming the details. At this rate, the ceremony will proceed smoothly," Falanya replied. Directing her attention to the king, she said, "Your Majesty, I fear my lack of experience may cause you trouble, but I shall do my best for the ceremony and our eternal triple alliance. I look forward to

working together."

Lawrence nodded. "Y-yes, me too."

Falanya giggled softly. "He-he. You seem rather nervous, King Lawrence."

"…!" Hearing someone far younger point out his insecurities immediately made him flush with embarrassment. However, Falanya fervently pressed on.

"I'm relieved. I thought I was the only one."

"Y-you're nervous, too, Princess Falanya?" Lawrence's shame transformed into empathy.

"Why, of course. My heart has been racing since the very start," Falanya confessed, her noble demeanor replaced with the bashfulness of an ordinary girl. "To think we're both stricken with anxiety… He-he, I told the marquess I wasn't sure what I'd do if His Majesty was some manner of ferocious beast. I'm relieved my fear was unfounded."

"…I-I see."

Sensing no insult or derision in her voice, Lawrence grinned. Mullein, on the other hand, wore a perplexed look. The prime minister was undoubtedly desperate to uncover Falanya's political aims but would never guess the truth. Falanya wasn't after anything. She sympathized with the derided puppet king and thought he deserved more relaxation and positivity in his life. That was all.

"When did you take the throne, Your Majesty?"

"…How many years has it been? At least ten, I suppose."

"That's quite a while. You've been working hard all this time. I myself have only begun traveling abroad recently and am still naive. I've wished to escape my troubles more than once."

"I…confess I've felt the same." Lawrence offered a wry smile.

Falanya continued excitedly. She and the king chatted like two friends by the water well. The rusted lock on Lawrence's mouth slowly loosened.

"Your Majesty." Perhaps convinced any further conversation would spell trouble, Mullein stepped in.

"You have other matters of government to attend to, so let us conclude here."

For a brief instant, there was burning animosity in Lawrence's expression. It vanished the moment the prime minister's eyes fell on the king, who looked away when faced with that gaze.

"Y-yes, you're right… Princess Falanya, you may go now."

"…"

She knew people didn't change after one short conversation. After a quick look of disappointment, Falanya pulled herself together.

“Yes, we shall take our leave.” The princess gave a polite bow. Just as she and Zenovia turned to leave…

“…No, wait.”

Lawrence’s command stopped the girls in their tracks. Mullein must not have expected this; his expression betrayed mild shock.

“What is it, Your Majesty?” Falanya asked.

The king was slow to answer. He mumbled incoherently, and his eyes darted around the room. Finally, just as everyone grew impatient…

“I heard the rumors. About Sirgis serving y—”

“Your Majesty.” Mullein’s piercing eyes and icy tone cut Lawrence off. That alone was enough to rattle the supposed leader of Delunio.

“You seem unwell, Your Majesty. Princess Falanya, please leave us for today.”

Mullein’s curt instruction left no room for argument. Even so, Falanya stood her ground and stared at the king as if urging him to speak.

“Princess Falanya.” This time, the prime minister’s voice carried irritation.

“There is a time for everything, Your Highness…” Zenovia whispered.

“…” Falanya kept her eyes on Lawrence, but he didn’t move. Realizing any further attempts were pointless, she bowed. “Your Majesty, I apologize for failing to notice your condition. Please take care of yourself.”

Falanya did as much as she could for now, but she still had a duty to fulfill. Only God knew whether her actions here would end in pointless self-satisfaction or sow seeds for the future.

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“How was your audience with the king?”

“Uneventful overall.”

Soon after returning to the manor, Falanya met with Sirgis to discuss what transpired.

“However, two things do concern me.”

“What might those be?”

“First, there’s no question Delunio’s higher-ups are aware that you’re my vassal. It’s likely they know you’re here, too.

Sirgis gave a slight nod. “Mullein is no fool. He’s definitely gathered enough intel to know that much.”

“King Lawrence tried to ask about you, but Mullein cut him off. Maybe the

prime minister wants to avoid damaging Delunio's relationship with Natra?"

"His Majesty did? Ah, yes. Indeed. If the nation discovered my presence, Mullein would have no choice but to investigate."

Sirgis closed his eyes as if imagining the scene. Falanya gave him a sidelong glance before continuing.

"There is also the matter of Princess Tolcheila."

"You met with Soljest's princess?"

"Yes, it looks like she came to Delunio as a substitute, too. I talked with her before the audience, but something seemed…off."

Falanya's expression tensed. "She wasn't herself… At least as far as I could tell. It's not like I know Princess Tolcheila particularly well, but I sensed something odd about her. Even Zenovia warned me to be wary."

"I cannot claim to know her deeply myself, but Princess Tolcheila is undeniably ambitious. Enough so that I believe she doesn't intend to attend the ceremony as a mere proxy. Regarding how she'll proceed for the time being…"

"I suppose we don't know enough to determine that yet." Falanya groaned flatly. "There's still time, and we won't learn anything else today. You're free to leave, Sirgis."

"Understood. Please excuse me."

Sirgis left at her request. His mind raced as he walked down the corridor.

So, they know I'm here.

Depending on the situation, Delunio's agents might contact Sirgis in secret. He could even reach out to them himself. Regardless of his banishment, Sirgis was a former prime minister. He still had a few domestic ties.

Mullein aside… How does His Majesty feel about me now?

When Sirgis was exiled, Lawrence vilified him to no end. Of all his vassals, losing the one who held true authority must have felt like a betrayal and blessed release from puppethood. Sirgis thought his relationship with the king was over. And yet…

From what Princess Falanya said, something related to me is apparently weighing on His Majesty's mind. However…

It was a risky subject that required the utmost caution.

As he contemplated this…

"Hey."

"_____?!"

Sirgis jumped at the voice behind him. He spun around to find a boy blending into the hallway shadows. It was Nanaki.

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“S-Sir Nanaki.”

“A warning.” Nanaki’s indifference matched Sirgis’s alarm. “If Falanya tells me to ignore an enemy, I ignore them. If Falanya tells me to protect an ally, I protect them. But nothing she says will convince me to forgive a traitor.”

Nanaki’s crimson eyes shot through Sirgis. Their intensity confirmed this threat was no bluff.

“Don’t forget. I’ll be watching you.”

Before Sirgis could respond, Nanaki vanished into the dark.

Sirgis stood there frozen and alone for some time. After calming down, he whispered as if to himself, “You don’t need to tell me that. I know… I know…”

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Tolcheila sat in the dim room and pored over the letter in her hand.

“…Your Highness,” her servant said. “It’s growing late. Perhaps you should retire for the night.”

“Hm? Ah.” Tolcheila looked up from the missive. “It’s already that late? I must have lost track of time.” She stretched with an adorable *Nghhh!* “How odd that I don’t feel the least bit weary. I intended to go to bed at the usual hour, but my enthusiasm seems to be working against me. He-he.”

“…Your Highness.”

There was concern in the servant’s expression and tone. After all, she knew what her young charge schemed after.

“Fret not. Everything is going according to plan. I’d hoped to flaunt it before Prince Wein, but alas… I suppose there’s no helping that now.” Tolcheila smiled fearlessly. “All shall know I am a political player who will shake this entire continent…”

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The ceremony was underway at last. Perhaps because it was primarily a celebration, the atmosphere was more casual than Falanya expected.

King Lawrence delivered his opening statement first, then Falanya and Tolcheila offered their congratulations on behalf of Natra and Soljest, respectively. Later, the three made a joint declaration in front of an audience of influential leaders and signed their names.

This concluded the ceremony proper, but it was immediately followed by a social meet-and-greet.

In truth, this was the real highlight for most attendees. Falanya symbolized Natra's unstoppable progress, and Tolcheila, princess of the mighty Soljest Kingdom, had recently started making a name for herself. Guests lined up in droves to exchange even a few words with them.

A turbulent wave of greetings struck the girls. Every spare corner of their minds was bombarded with facts about nobles and their business ventures, and each guest lavished them with tidings and gifts.

There were more greetings everywhere Falanya turned.

Greetings, greetings, greetings, greetings, greetings…

"Fwaaah…"

By the time the queue died down, Falanya was all but panting.

"You were marvelous today, Princess." Zenovia smiled. The Marquess of Natra naturally had quite a few introductions herself, but those numbers were paltry compared to Falanya's.

"I never expected so many people…" the princess quietly lamented.

The venue was still packed. Falanya took this opportunity to hide in a corner, but it wouldn't be long before a crowd formed around her again.

"I was curious how Delunio would fare as host since it's on the decline… But as one might expect, the attendance of Natra's and Soljest's royalty ensured an impressive turnout," Zenovia mused. "However, I am concerned by the disproportionate number of merchants."

Falanya cocked her head at this unexpected remark. "Were there really so many?"

"Yes. I mostly spoke with vendors. Surely you met some as well, Princess Falanya."

"Hmm. Now that you mention it…"

The never-ending onslaught of callers made it difficult to pay attention to anyone, but upon reflection, more than a few people introduced themselves as merchants.

"I wonder why that is?"

Were this the merchant city of Mealtars, no one would have suspected anything unusual. However, this was the Delunio Kingdom. Although a large gathering of merchants was possible on occasion, it was more natural to assume there were hidden motives at play where politics were involved. Regardless, Falanya couldn't begin to imagine the purpose and cocked her head.

"Please excuse me for interrupting your private discussion."

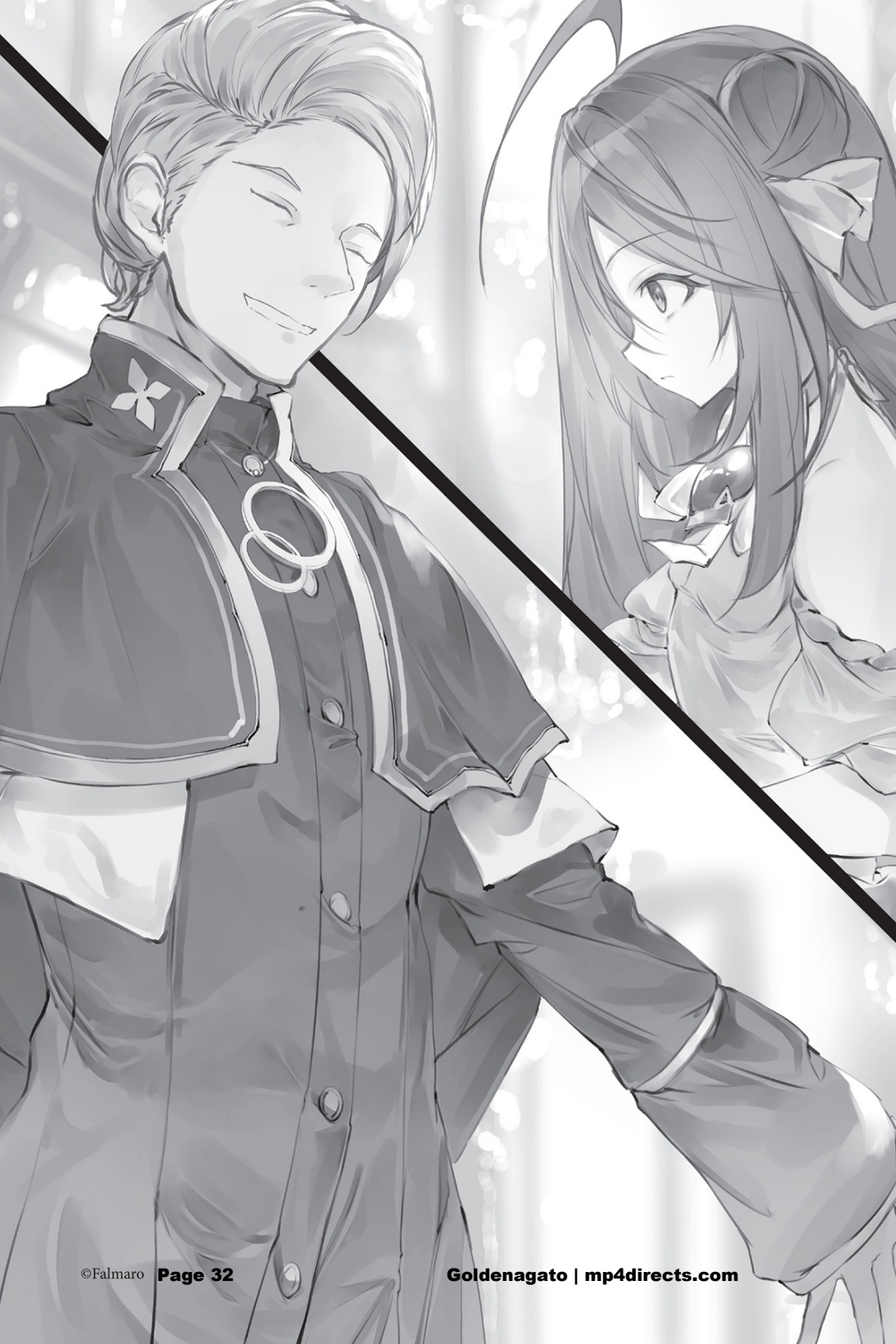
The girls turned around to find Prime Minister Mullein standing before them,

accompanied by an unfamiliar young man.

“Hello, Sir Mullein. What may I do for you?” Zenovia took a casual yet defensive step in front of Falanya.

Mullein smiled in an apparent effort to put them at ease.

“You are both our guests of honor. What sort of host would I be if I kept you in the shadows? There is someone I wish to introduce, so I thought I might ask for a moment of your time.”



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Mullein looked next to him. Taking his cue, the man stepped forward and offered a deep bow.

"It is an honor to make your acquaintances, Princess Falanya, Marquess of Marden. I am Yuan, an active missionary in this land."

"A missionary?"

This young man with the gentle expression had an unexpected occupation. Falanya blinked in surprise, and Zenovia was visibly bewildered.

"You serve Levetia, correct? To think there is still mission work in Delunio…" Tacit questions hung heavy in Zenovia's tone. After all, missionaries normally evangelized to the people of unconverted nations. The Teachings of Levetia were already deeply ingrained in Delunio's society, so Zenovia assumed there was no need to spread teachings here. And yet…

"Ah, my apologies. It seems my choice of words has invited misunderstanding," the missionary Yuan said. "I am a member of Eastern Levetia."

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Falanya recalled studying the history of Eastern Levetia with her tutor, Claudius.

"As the name suggests, Eastern Levetia is a denomination mostly based in the Eastern continent."

"Let us go back one century. Princess Falanya, what important event affected Natra at the time?"

"The Circulous Law, right?"

Claudius nodded, satisfied.

A century ago, Levetia announced an official reinterpretation of the established pilgrimage. Previously, the route circled the whole continent, and many traveled east each year to retrace the footsteps of Levetia's founder.

However, the Circulous Law redefined the scriptures and declared the western half of the pilgrimage more than sufficient. This decree was supposedly born from the era's Holy Elites, who feared the death and injury of pilgrims trekking to the pagan East—but the truth told otherwise.

In reality, returnees were introducing Eastern culture and values to the West, and the Holy Elites loathed the idea of threats to their vested interests.

"The new pilgrimage route established by the Circulous Law excluded Natra and sabotaged our trade with traveling believers, right?"

Inevitably, these results led Natra to turn farther east and accept the Flahm.

“An excellent answer, Princess Falanya. However, the Circulous Law did not devastate Natra alone.”

“So if it impacted us in the north, then what about the Falcasso Kingdom to the south?”

Three main roads connected the East and West. The northern route led to Natra, while the southern one went to the Falcasso Kingdom.

“Falcasso wasn’t included in the pilgrimage either, but since it was on friendly terms with Levetia and successfully fortified its position as a breakwater to the East, the Circulous Law did not leave much of a negative impact.”

“Hmph, how unfair.” After spurning a nation she knew little about, Falanya tilted her head.

“But then, who *did* suffer?”

“The answer is Levetia’s followers in the East.”

“Ah!” Falanya exclaimed. It hadn’t occurred to her before, but it was reasonable that some believers set off on religious journeys to convert the East.

“At the time, the Holy Elite were criticized for twisting the scriptures to fit their political narrative. It’s also said they made this decision secretly and sprang the news on the East like a bolt from the blue.”

“The backlash must have been considerable.”

“Indeed. Needless to say, the Holy Elite were members of Levetia as well as distinguished royals and nobles. They refused to listen to anyone, instead treating the East like a land of savages. Ultimately, enraged believers split from Levetia to formed Eastern Levetia.”

“That’s no surprise.” Falanya sighed. She’d heard of Eastern Levetia before but never knew of its complex history. Natra had been entangled as well, but the princess now understood the widespread impact of the Circulous Law with fresh clarity.

“Eastern Levetia came to the fledgling Earthworld Empire in search of an ally and established friendly relations. From there, it expanded alongside the developing Empire, and it is presently the main religion of the East.”

“Did it become the state religion?”

“No, it didn’t go that far. The Empire didn’t want a deity to rob their emperor of his authority, and Eastern Levetia was wary of entering politics since it was fickle world leaders who had inspired the movement in the first place,” Claudius explained. “However, there is no denying Eastern Levetia holds great power. It is always searching for opportunities to advance into the West. Should you meet its followers, please be careful. Such beasts will do anything to get ahead in

these troubled times…”

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And now, let us return to the present.

An Eastern Levetia man stood before Falanya and Zenovia.

Levetia and Eastern Levetia don’t accept each other… They’re openly hostile. What’s a missionary doing in Delunio?

Zenovia also knew about Eastern Levetia to a certain degree. It was far more widely accepted in the East than its precursor. That’s why she recognized the oddness of this situation. This was the West. Yuan should have avoided coming here at all costs.

“There’s no need to worry,” Mullein said as if perceiving Zenovia’s tension. “Although indeed a follower of Eastern Levetia, he has begun to harbor doubts. This admirable man came here in search of the true Teachings of Levetia.”

Yuan nodded. “Embarrassingly, I devoted my life to a single religion only to reach a dead end. I journeyed west with similar-minded comrades to find enlightenment, and Sir Mullein kindly took me under his wing.”

The young, mild-mannered Yuan had a voice befitting a missionary. Anyone in town would have gladly lent him an ear. Nonetheless, Zenovia knew the dangers of opening up to such people in a political setting.

A servant rushed up to Mullein. “Your Excellency, might I have a word…?”

“Can you not see I am entertaining our guests of honor?”

“Y-yes, but the matter is rather urgent.”

Mullein resisted the urge to click his tongue, turning to Falanya and Zenovia. “Please excuse me for one moment, ladies. Yuan, do remember your manners.”

“Of course. Thank you very much, Sir Mullein.” Yuan bowed as Mullein left, and he soon turned bashful. “Oh dear. Despite my words of assurance to Sir Mullein, I am terribly nervous in the company of such lovely ladies.”

“Is that so? You appear to be quite the charming gentleman.”

“Your words flatter me. Someone like myself is more comfortable reading scriptures than interacting with others. If only I could entertain you somehow…” A thought must have crossed Yuan’s mind, for he smiled. “Well then, as a token of our newfound friendship, I shall answer your question from earlier.”

“My question?”

“Yes, as to why there are so many merchants at this ceremony.”

Zenovia was dumbfounded. She was sure that conversation happened before

Mullein approached.

"I cannot say I approve of eavesdropping on young ladies."

"I have warned myself against it countless times, but sadly these ears are ill-bred. I beg your forgiveness." Yuan shrugged humorously, but Falanya could bear the suspense no longer and blurted out the question burning inside her.

"Sir Yuan, why *are* there so many merchants attending?"

Yuan looked into Falanya's eyes, inspecting her, yet the princess's gaze remained steadfast. After a brief moment, he spoke as though appeased.

"The answer is simple, Princess Falanya. The merchants have invested in this ceremony."

"They have?"

Yuan nodded. "Preparing a venue and inviting guests is costly, and Delunio cannot handle things alone in its current state. Therefore, it depends on vendors to bring everything together."

No one could blame a country in Delunio's predicament. However, the real question was how the nation managed to loosen the merchants' purse strings in the first place.

"I take it Delunio promised them the opportunity to connect with Natra and Soljest?" Falanya ventured.

Yuan grinned.

I see… So that's it.

By following the pair's conversation, Zenovia realized what was going on. Although destitute, Delunio wished to invite representatives from Natra and Soljest under the pretext of a ceremony. The merchants, on the other hand, longed to rub elbows with two rapidly evolving countries but had little opportunity to do so. The day's festivities served the interests of both parties.

Zenovia understood this, but Falanya was already one step ahead.

"…Sir Yuan, might I ask another question?"

"By all means, Princess Falanya."

"I see," she replied concisely. "You are the cardinal who brought Delunio and the merchants together, correct?"

Yuan's expression froze. Judging by his reaction, she'd hit a bull's-eye.

"…What makes you say that? And why do you suddenly believe I am a cardinal?"

"There are surely multiple people financing this event, but Delunio will still undoubtedly show its biggest investor special treatment. You're the only one Sir Mullein has introduced to me personally. It would be strange if you truly were a

simple missionary," Falanya explained.

"I've heard the hierarchy in Eastern Levetia includes a dozen or so cardinals who govern under the pontiff. Is it reasonable to presume you, a representative of Eastern Levetia with enough authority to enter the West, are one of them?"

Yuan's face soured as Falanya made her point in a merciless, matter-of-fact voice.

"I was also surprised to learn you were a missionary, especially in Delunio. To me, you had an oddly merchantlike air. Just like someone from Mealtars," the princess said with a smile. Her expression radiated pure, joyous nostalgia, devoid of cynicism or scorn.

Yuan stared at the young girl, then sighed in resignation. "…My goodness. I heard there was a fearsome dragon in the far north. The rumors must be true if his younger sister is this astute. You are correct, Princess Falanya. I was born in Mealtars and currently serve as a cardinal on a vital mission for the pontiff. I organized this ceremony."

"Why would someone from Eastern Levetia do such a thing?"

"Our aim, of course, is to make Delunio a bridgehead and spread the Teachings of Eastern Levetia to the West," Yuan answered candidly. "Eastern Levetia has been planning to expand westward for some time. To us, those who preach the Teachings of Levetia are traitors who distort God's Word and lead the people astray. Our mission is to purge their doctrine from the continent."

Yuan's tone hinted at his personal lack of such ambition.

"Delunio was crippled by the loss of its former prime minister, and last year's famine in the West drove the country deeper into a corner. It was an excellent opportunity to seize upon."

As a nation rooted in the Teachings of Levetia, Delunio considered Eastern Levetia a foe to be shunned at all costs. However, various obstacles left no other choice.

This is mostly Wein's doing.

He was the main reason for Prime Minister Sirgis's downfall and the famine. Even Wein himself couldn't have predicted how Eastern Levetia would capitalize on this chain of events.

"Might I also correct your earlier deduction, Princess Falanya? While I was the one who brought Delunio and the merchants together, the ceremony's largest investor is Eastern Levetia."

"Does Eastern Levetia see that much value in working with Natra and Soljest?"

“Yes. And it appears that assumption was not made in error.” Yuan then broached new territory.

“Princess Falanya, would you care to chat with me later?”

“Are you asking me as an individual or a missionary?”

“As an individual, of course.” Yuan shrugged. “Or so I wish to say. However, the Marquess of Marden is giving me a frightful look, and I fear I may incite the wrath of Your Highness’s brother. So I shall ask you as a missionary.”

Falanya cracked a tiny smile. Yuan initially appeared like a typical believer, but his flippant nature was slowly revealing itself. However, she didn’t find him unpleasant. Never one to waste a business opportunity, Yuan was proud and refused to belittle himself. His confidence left a favorable impression on someone like Falanya, who had a soft spot for Mealtars.

“I would be honored to accept. However…” Falanya turned to Zenovia beside her. Her gaze asked what she should do, and the marquess’s eyes gave a silent answer. Caution was necessary, but Zenovia would respect Falanya’s decision. “However, are you certain I will suffice? As we discussed earlier, you have one more dance partner.”

Falanya glanced over at the crowd gathered around Tolcheila. Natra wasn’t the only star today. Soljest’s princess was also a guest of honor and an individual with whom Eastern Levetia sought relations.

“Princess Tolcheila is charming, of course. Unfortunately, she cares for little save for herself. Previous accomplishments also suggest we are better suited to each other, Princess Falanya.”

Evidently, Eastern Levetia prioritized Natra. Yes, looking at the nation’s past achievements, it—that is, Wein—was making a grand fool of Levetia. Soljest, on the other hand, was firmly under the religion’s influence. Eastern Levetia’s belief that Natra would be a more comfortable collaborator was understandable.

Natra sided more with the East despite its feigned neutrality. The West considered this a potential threat. Natra was an unbeatable eyesore. If it joined with Eastern Levetia, the West would view the union as a hostile alliance against it.

If Eastern Levetia wants to destroy Levetia’s stronghold, I suspect Soljest will do everything in its power to stop it… But maybe gaining a foothold in Natra and Delunio is part of a long-term strategy?

Declaring one’s intentions to weigh both nations and choose only one had far-reaching implications. If Yuan joined Natra, it would be that much harder for Eastern Levetia to move forward with Soljest. Regardless, did Eastern Levetia’s

followers prefer Natra because the nation seemed more cooperative or because Soljest had been judged to carry no value?

I'm just going in circles by this point.

Falanya knew Eastern Levetia wanted to get close to Natra. Yuan was a pleasant person, and Falanya had an interest in Eastern Levetia, but it was a whole different story where politics were concerned. For the time being, her best option was to discuss the matter with Sirgis later.

Just as she attempted to parry Yuan's invitation…

"…Oh?"

A commotion rose from the entrance. Falanya, Zenovia, and Yuan saw people, presumably servants, frantically rushing in and out.

Did something happen?

While Falanya and the others watched in bewilderment, one of Zenovia's servants ran over. "Lady Zenovia! I have an urgent message from the Marden territory…!"

"Calm down. We have an audience." Despite her call for discretion, Zenovia felt the gravity of the situation and tensed. "What's going on?"

"It's a coup!" the servant cried.

"The king of Soljest has been overthrown…!"

A shock wave rippled through the crowd. Unable to process this revelation all at once, the guests stood paralyzed.

Falanya saw the sole outcast among those astonished from the corner of her eye. Tolcheila smiled slightly at the news.

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It was a bizarre sight.

The dining table was lined with enough food to satisfy several people, but only one person was seated. Since no individual could ever eat so much, the other diners would likely arrive soon.

That was the rational deduction, but logic didn't apply to this individual.

He was massive. No, more than that. The man was literally a blob of flesh so gargantuan it was hard to categorize him as human anymore. He was an animate boulder living an aberrant existence.

King Gruyere of Soljest—that was the name of this corpulent mass.

"Mm, yes. As I thought, seasonal fruits have a magnificent texture."

He picked off morsels from a mountainous bowl and popped them into his mouth. Produce large enough to fill the average person's palm looked like candy in his hands.

"Please, help yourself."

Gruyere glanced at the man sitting across from him—the man and his several armed soldiers. The group leveled spears at the king.

Yes, Gruyere wasn't the only curiosity present. The force surrounding him was equally unusual.

"…Save your breath, Father. It won't buy you any time," the other man spat. This was Kabra, Gruyere's biological son and the prince of Soljest. "My men have already taken control of the palace. Stall all you like. Help will never arrive."

Kabra made it clear he was neither putting on airs nor acting on impulse. The weapon pointed at his father and liege meant business.

"'Help'?" Gruyere blinked in surprise and burst into a fit of laughter. "Of all the things to say! My son, a cry for help is only for those times when you cannot save yourself." Gruyere's voice took on deep menace. "Do you honestly believe

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this is enough to take me down?"

"…!"

Everyone instinctively recoiled at the wave of pressure coming from the king.

A bevy of spears pointed at him was not enough to tarnish the majesty of the great Soljest Kingdom's Beast King.

"Enough bravado!" Kabra shouted as if urging himself forward. "Father, you will immediately surrender the throne to me. I will become the next king and lead our nation."

Gruyere sneered. "It would have fallen straight into your lap anyway. Are you so intimidated by your little sister, my son?"

Kabra's expression twisted. "Tolcheila's ambition has not escaped my notice. There's no question she's scheming to replace me. You know this and did nothing to stop her… Why, Father?! I am the crown prince. Why did you cast me aside for Tolcheila?!"

"You, the crown prince, chose to rest on your laurels and take the easy road. Meanwhile, Tolcheila applied herself and learned the skills necessary to accomplish what I asked. That's all there is to it."

"Didn't you realize such actions might put a queen on the Soljest throne?!"

Gruyere nodded with a grin. "That sounds mighty interesting if you ask me."

"Interesting?! Father, do you have *any* understanding of politics?!"

"It's my fun little hobby," Gruyere professed. "You can do whatever you want with a country as long as the people don't starve to death. Developing a food culture, raising the world's most powerful army, worshipping one's god of choice—These are all nothing more than the whims and tastes of political players."

Kabra was stupefied by this brutal assessment but swiftly recovered. "…As I suspected, you are unfit to be king." He gave a hand signal, and his soldiers approached Gruyere with rope. "Resist, and your life will be forfeit. Father, surely you wish to live the rest of your days in peace."

"I haven't desired that once in my life…but very well. No matter the reason, a parent is duty-bound to respect their child's decisions."

The soldiers struggled to tie the rope around the king's immense girth. Gruyere gave them a sidelong glance.

"My son, I have one word of caution. You assembled a group of like-minded conservatives who oppose a ruling queen in response to the threat of Tolcheila's growing influence. Then you waited for her to leave the country before staging an uprising."

"…And? What about it?"

"Do you honestly think Tolcheila hasn't anticipated this?"

Kabra paused but ultimately rejected the idea. "Don't be a fool. Tolcheila wouldn't have gone abroad if she knew my plan. Now she's alone and helpless in another land. She's not Prince Wein. How could she possibly retaliate?"

That was a fair point. If Tolcheila were in Soljest, she could have raised an army against this revolt. However, that was unthinkable while she was abroad. The princess would undoubtedly rush home, but Kabra needed only to conclude his business before then.

"…Yes, you're right. She cannot compare to Prince Wein," Gruyere agreed.

Kabra sniffed. "Hmph, it seems you finally understand… Take him away!"

Gruyere was bound and loaded on a palanquin. As they prepared to carry him off, the deposed king glanced at his son from afar and whispered to himself, "Yes, Tolcheila is not Prince Wein. But she's trying to reach his level. And that's what truly counts."

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The shocking news of Prince Kabra's coup against King Gruyere spread across the continent. Word naturally reached Natra as well, and the first words out of Wein's mouth were…

"What's that fatty doing?! We're already freakin' swamped over heeeeere!"

Wein cursed Gruyere from his office.

"Hear me out, Ninym. What are the chances this is all a big mistake…?!"

"We have identical reports from multiple sources. In addition, Prince Kabra… No, King Kabra, has announced his ascension in light of his predecessor King Gruyere's illness and inability to carry out his duties. There is no doubting it."

Wein gripped his head. A maelstrom of thoughts, like the fate of the alliance and the borrowed port in Soljest, ran through his mind. However, he set those aside to continue shouting.

"Kabra is the crown prince, right?! Why the hell did he stage a coup…?!"

"I can't say for certain, but he and King Gruyere have always had a strained relationship. Princess Tolcheila's recent activity may have put pressure on Kabra and given him reason to believe she would steal the throne."

Wein groaned.

"C'mon now. Seriously? Anyone could have told him there was no way Soljest would accept a queen overnight!"

Kabra was set to be king, but he went ahead and shot himself in the foot. Future historians were already rolling with laughter.

"The danger Princess Tolcheila posed must have skewed his judgment… At any rate, King Gruyere seems alive, but he's under house arrest in a detached villa. King Kabra is building his forces and crushing all who oppose his reign."

"…Think anyone has a chance of taking him down?"

"The probability is low. Although Princess Tolcheila is the most likely to lead a counterattack, she's in Delunio right now and lacks a unified position. King Kabra knows this and will make sure any resistance in Soljest is put down by the time she returns."

"Guess he doesn't want things to get too heated and risk riling up Natra…" Wein muttered pensively. "So Tolcheila's over in Delunio, too, huh?"

Of course, Wein already knew Tolcheila was attending the ceremony in Delunio. Initially, he assumed it was Gruyere's way of saying "I'll honor the alliance but that's it."

"……"

"What's wrong, Wein?"

“Ninym, you haven’t heard anything from Falanya yet, right?”

“No, but I expect to soon because of the situation… Will you contact the princess first and order her to return home?”

This turmoil was entirely Soljest’s personal issue. Delunio was hardly involved, let alone Falanya. Nonetheless, nearby political upheaval meant there was a decent chance she’d run into danger. Wein could protect Falanya in Natra, but his options were limited while she was away. Requesting her return was the standard course of action.

“No, I’ll leave that up to Falanya.” Surprisingly enough, Wein declined.

“Are you sure?”

“Even I can’t tell what the situation is really like over there. Falanya should have a better idea of whether to leave or stay. Plus, based on her progress, I’m confident she’ll come up with a solid game plan. Right now, Natra’s real problems are in the East.”

“You’re not wrong…”

A knock came at the office door, and a government official entered.

“Pardon me, Your Highness. An emissary from the Empire has arrived.”

“Right on schedule. Show her in.”

The guest was Fyshe Blundell, trusted retainer to the Earthworld Empire’s Second Imperial Princess Lowellmina.

“Thank you for seeing me today, Your Highness.”

“No problem. Let’s get started.”

Invisible sparks flew between the grinning pair.

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The Emperor passed several years ago, leaving the Earthworld Empire divided into three factions.

The faction of Second Imperial Prince Bardloche, primarily supported by the military.

The faction of Third Imperial Prince Manfred, chiefly propped up by the Empire’s annexed provinces.

And last, the faction of Second Imperial Princess Lowellmina, the woman who lamented the nation’s civil strife and proposed a peaceful solution.

Previously, there was one other group led by Imperial Prince Demetrio and favored by conservatives. However, he lost a political fight against Lowellmina and was forced to hide in a remote region.

Of the remaining three, Lowellmina's side had the most momentum.

"Things were pretty different during your last visit, Lady Blundell." Wein's words of admiration were entirely heartfelt.

"Thank you for your assistance back then," Fyshe replied. She gave a dazzling smile. "We looked forward to your visiting the Imperial capital with tremendous anticipation. It's unfortunate our paths didn't cross."

Lowellmina had invited Wein to the Imperial capital last year. The coordinator-slash-diplomat sent to Natra at the time was Fyshe as well.

However, after a series of twists and turns, Wein ended up working with First Prince Demetrio and never took one step inside the capital. The Empire had sabotaged its own invitation, so it was no wonder Lowellmina felt the need to apologize.

Nevertheless, once one realized it was a trap and Wein's failure to reach the capital was all part of Lowellmina's scheme, such remorse was reduced to a bald-faced lie.

"Why, think nothing of it. After all, the sun and stars are the only constant motion in this world."

Unsurprisingly, Wein knew what was happening behind the scenes and met with Lowellmina to strike a deal. That should have been the end of it, but…

"Still, *too* much misfortune might put us in a rut," Wein warned. He wasn't serious. This caustic advice was only meant to keep Fyshe on her toes.

"Natra and Princess Lowellmina share similar circumstances. Needless to say, we are taking every possible precaution."

Apparently, Lowellmina wasn't concerned about stealth this time around.

Well, as Fyshe said, this is a totally different scenario.

Natra supported Lowellmina until the previous year, but its allegiance shifted between factions depending on convenience. This behavior prompted Lowellmina to set her trap, but now Natra was an unmistakable ally. If the northern nation tried to approach either of the remaining Imperial Princes, it would only be rejected. Therefore, Natra had no choice but to side with Lowellmina, and the princess likewise had no motive to topple Natra.

"Oh, you're *good*," Wein muttered to himself.

Lowellmina bolstered her faction using the routed first prince's forces, and everyone knew Wein, the era's renowned golden child, had her back. She also recently proved herself a worthy politician by mending relations with Patura, an old adversary to the south.

Compared to her brothers, who were still squabbling over the throne, she

seemed a far more trustworthy sort.

"But that's exactly why the princes have to make a move, too."

Fyshe nodded at Wein's assessment. "That seems to be the motive behind this renewed conflict."

In the southeast, a large-scale battle was brewing west of Bardloche's and Manfred's domains.

"Both originally wanted to crush the princess's faction first, right?"

Someone as popular, successful, and talented as Lowellmina was a threat to her brothers. In truth, they were dying to get rid of her as soon as possible but couldn't. Slaying a beloved public figure would invite fierce backlash from the people and opposing factions. Each prince was already up against the ropes, so a mistake like that was far too costly.

The brothers must have decided to beat her in a one-on-one match. Lowellmina's awareness of her sect's weak military and the dangers of a direct attack despite its widespread influence supported this theory. Such reasoning was further proof of Lowellmina's sharp intellect.

"Princess Lowellmina is concerned this armed conflict will damage the neighboring towns and wishes to promptly address the situation with Your Highness's ai—"

"Heh."

"Your Highness?"

Wein suddenly cracked a smile, and Fyshe tilted her head quizzically.

"Ah, don't mind me. I remembered how you said something similar last time we met," he explained.

"Urk."

Last time. In other words, when Lowellmina laid her trap.

Wein continued cheerfully while Fyshe sat in obvious discomfort. "Oh, don't get me wrong. I'm delighted to hear Princess Lowellmina is as virtuous and compassionate as ever. Right?" Wein turned to Ninym beside him.

She shrugged and whispered, "You're a fantastic liar."

"Hey now, I totally mean it," Wein replied.

Lowellmina loved the Empire with all her heart and worried about its future. Wein respected this, and since Natra would be in trouble if her faction took a nosedive, he was more than willing to lend a hand.

"However, this is a perfect chance for Princess Lowellmina to watch the princes put an end to each other and the feud. Why not just leave them alone?" Wein suggested.

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Honor and morals aside, he had a point. There was no need for Lowellmina to step in from the sidelines while her rivals were duking it out. Moreover, the battlefield was far west of the Imperial capital. There was no risk of Lowellmina being caught in the crossfire.

The princess herself undoubtedly knew this. Love alone couldn't make her dreams come true, no matter how much she cherished the Empire.

"With all due respect, Your Highness," Fyshe said in polite disagreement. "Allowing the princes' barbarity to persist does not align with Princess Lowellmina's ambitions as future Empress, and I believe the people agree."

"I see. Yes, you're right."

The beautiful, fairylike princess with an undying love for the Empire. Regardless of the truth, that was the public persona Lowellmina projected. Keeping inactive while her brothers fought would give rise to a discrepancy between that image and reality, rattling her support base.

Manfred and Bardloche might be counting on that fact.

Lowellmina's faction couldn't rush to violence, but neither could it sit on its hands while the princes threw their weights around. Lowellmina had to step in and demonstrate her strength—and she probably already had a secret plan in the works.

Which is why she wants to make this quick.

Careless interference on Lowellmina's part risked inviting Western interference. The current conflict region was particularly close to the West's Kingdom of Falcasso. The ongoing chaos might provide the Empire's neighbor with a golden opportunity.

The two princes hoped to drag Lowellmina through the mud. The princess aimed to resolve the matter swiftly and steal the glory. A great game of tug-of-war was already underway.

"…I admire Princess Lowellmina's lofty ambitions," Wein remarked. "As an ally, you have my full cooperation. But what is your plan exactly?"

"On that matter, I have a message from Her Highness. Please read this." Fyshe held out a letter, and Ninym handed it to Wein.

"…"

A wry smile formed on his face as he looked it over. "Did Princess Lowellmina come up with this plan?"

"Of course. Do you have any objections?"

"Not at all… I'd expect no less from her."

If this succeeded, their problems would be resolved without Lowellmina

suffering a single disadvantage. A loss would mean a devastating blow, but it was still worth the risk.

"We'll need the princess's diplomatic expertise, but it's a solid enough plan. Natra can provide the support you need."

"Then you mean…"

"There are still a few kinks to work out, but let's move forward with this."

Fyshe's face flushed with both happiness and relief. Wein silently praised Lowellmina's skill as they started to get into the details, until a knock came at the door.

Wein and Ninym immediately looked at each other. No other guests were scheduled for today. Wondering what might have happened, Ninym opened the door and was greeted by a government official.

"Please pardon the interruption. This just arrived…"

"This is… Yes, I see. Understood. I shall pass it along to His Highness."

The official bowed, and Ninym gave him a sidelong glance before returning to Wein's side. She handed the prince a letter.

"What is it, Ninym?"

"It appears to be a letter from Princess Falanya."

Wein raised an eyebrow.

This was urgent information on the status of Delunio, Falanya, and her delegation following the chaos that erupted in Soljest.

"Shall I excuse myself, Your Highness?" Fyshe asked courteously. She, too, was curious how the young princess was faring abroad, but she couldn't risk inviting Wein's displeasure and ruining the negotiation.

"No, I'll just read it over real quick. Give me a second," he replied.

Left speechless, Fyshe dropped back into her chair. Wein glanced at her, then returned his attention to the missive.

Falanya's clear, concise message relayed what she'd seen and heard. She informed Wein in a postscript that she would remain in Delunio until the nation decided how to respond.

This reflected the princess's personal growth. However, Wein's attention was entirely focused on other parts of the letter.

Princess Tolcheila… Eastern Levetia… Delunio…

He dipped his head and fell silent. Only Ninym knew this gesture meant he was considering the information and reorganizing it.

"Your Highness…?" Fyshe asked, concerned.

Wein's head shot up. "Lady Blundell, about our conversation earlier…"

“Huh? Oh yes,” she replied vacantly.

“I have no intention of backing out of our agreement. However, I’d like to add one condition if we’re going to be working together.”

“That will depend… But very well, “ Fyshe said cautiously.

Whatever he had in mind couldn’t be good.

Wein smiled. “Not to worry. I’m not asking much… My little sister is out there doing her best in a foreign country. As her big brother, I just want to lend a hand.”

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The Delunio palace buzzed like a beehive, but that was to be expected. Political unrest had broken out in Soljest during the celebration of its alliance with Natra and Delunio.

The festivities were put on hold, and Delunio’s top leaders frantically debated over a course of action without a moment’s rest.

“Any word from Soljest?”

“We’ll have to rethink our defensive strategy if the alliance fails!”

“Send an ambassador to contact King Kabra! And don’t forget the spies!”

“What about the ceremony? Most of the guests are still lodging in the castle town.”

The pandemonium reigned while everyone panicked over this unforeseen twist.

“…”

King Lawrence stared at everyone as he sat like a piece of furniture. Present in body alone, he didn’t add a single word to the discussion. His lack of trust in his vassals was evident in his frustrated expression.

Everyone else was well aware of the king’s mood but paid him no mind. After all, asking his opinion felt like a waste of time. Delunio found itself in a dysfunctional situation where mutual trust and respect between ruler and retainer was nonexistent.

“…Your Majesty.” One person did call out to King Lawrence, however. It was Prime Minister Mullein. “There is one matter we wish for you to approve.”

The request was a courteous one but left no room for debate. Lawrence gulped.

“Wh-what is it…?” Lawrence couldn’t refuse. After all, Mullein was the true leader of Delunio, not him.

The Prime Minister's lips curled into a smile. "Why, it's quite obvious—we wish to take advantage of the situation."

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"…Things aren't going well for us," Eastern Levetia missionary Yuan groaned in a room of the Delunio palace.

"The ceremony's postponement was certainly a hard blow. Especially considering the funds spent…" replied an ally who'd accompanied him from the East.

Yuan shook his head. "That's not the issue. We can repeat the process as long as we raise enough money. If we wish to hold a ceremony, we just have to wait for another opportunity to approach Sir Mullein."

"Then what troubles you?"

"…"

Yuan couldn't put the foreboding sensation into words, but he knew ignoring it was ill-advised. That was a rule of thumb from his merchant days.

Everything was going so well, too…

Eastern Levetia's greatest desire was to take control of Levetia rather than the West as a whole. That was the reason it approached Delunio's Prime Minister Mullein in the first place.

The fall of Delunio. Widespread famine in the West. Mullein, who rejected the former prime minister and wished to carve his own path. Everything came together harmoniously and opened Delunio's door for Eastern Levetia.

Unfortunately, we're still outsiders in the end. Coin can do nothing more to earn us a place in this country.

Eastern Levetia's position in Delunio was like a sandcastle ready to crumble at the tiniest misstep. That's why Yuan encouraged Mullein to hold a ceremony that would allow Eastern Levetia to unite with Natra and Soljest.

The triple alliance between Natra, Soljest, and Delunio differed from the solidarity among Western nations, and Eastern Levetia intended to weave itself into that framework.

Princess Falanya left a decent impression as well.

Yuan was only referring to her amiable nature. Her brother, Prince Wein, was the one in charge, so Eastern Levetia's people would need to speak with him if they hoped to spread their doctrine to Natra.

Natra's rapid development meant an endless demand for manpower and

resources. Yuan believed Eastern Levetia could form a solid relationship with the country by filling that void.

Or so I thought until the chaos in Soljest broke out.

Both Natra and Delunio were busy keeping a close eye on Soljest. Eastern Levetia was the last thing on their minds.

But depending on how Soljest fares, we may be able to seize upon the situation.

King Gruyere was a Holy Elite. Introducing Eastern Levetia to his domain was once a daunting task, but now his son Kabra had ousted him.

Would Kabra inherit the title of Holy Elite? He'd certainly try, but there was no telling whether or not the others would accept a usurper. If they rejected Kabra and Eastern Levetia's message spread to Delunio and Natra, Soljest might follow in its allies' footsteps. Perhaps that was too tall an order, though.

At any rate, we should get in touch with King Kabra as soon as possible.

Yuan's mind raced as he calculated the necessary funds.

It'd be a simple enough matter if Princess Tolcheila could act as our liaison, but that might prove challenging. I hear the siblings are political rivals.

Yuan recalled that, prior to the ceremony's postponement, he spoke with Tolcheila briefly before Falanya. Despite the young woman's harsh demeanor, Yuan had hoped to find some in with her. Unfortunately, his attempt proved futile.

At least, that's how it appeared at the time. Yuan wouldn't have given the encounter a second thought if things ended there, but…

What was *that?*

Tolcheila had expressed disinterest and cut Yuan off in the middle of his pitch. And when Yuan excused himself, he saw something in the princess's eyes.

A hunger, like a beast staring at prey.

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"…What should we do now?"

The uprising in Soljest forced every nation to rearrange its schedule. The same was true for Falanya's delegation group.

"I told Wein in my letter that I'd wait here until Delunio came to a decision…but there's been no action."

Delunio requested that she remain in the country so everyone could decide on a proper response. Falanya had no objection to this, but it felt as though the

situation had come to a standstill. There was a good chance Delunio was stuck in a heated debate, but at this rate, her delegation would be pointlessly waiting around forever.

"What do you think, Sirgis?"

Falanya looked at the man beside her, but her trusted vassal's mind was clearly elsewhere.

"Sirgis?"

She called out to him again, and the man jolted as he returned to himself.

"My apologies. I was lost in thought."

"Is something troubling you?"

"Ah, no…" Sirgis hesitated for a moment. "I'm simply surprised to hear Eastern Levetia has entered Delunio…"

"Come to think of it, aren't you the one who promoted the Teachings of Levetia here?"

"Yes. And I stand by that decision."

The Delunio Kingdom was a tiny nation bordering the central continent. Surrounded by menacing neighbors on all sides, it had no choice but to vow allegiance to Levetia to save itself.

"But now Sir Mullein is working with Eastern Levetia."

"It's not unusual for successive administrations to prioritize feelings over logic, publicly reject a predecessor's policies, or lead the nation in the opposite direction."

Politicians rarely relinquished their position willingly. They often fell from power through either the natural cycle of life or government mismanagement. Deviating from a predecessor's established practices was a simple way for the next generation to set itself apart from older failures.

Thus, it was no surprise that the new prime minister, Mullein, wanted to take the country in a fresh direction after Sirgis was banished.

"An alliance between Delunio and Eastern Levetia is still far too risky…" Sirgis muttered.

A close relationship with Eastern Levetia would mean breaking existent ties with mainstream Levetia. In Sirgis's opinion, doing so while ignoring Delunio's unresolved geographic issues was akin to marching toward a cliff.

"Then… Maybe that's why he's trying to strengthen Delunio's relationship with Natra and Soljest?"

Falanya was trying to spare Sirgis's feelings, but she made a good point. If Delunio intended to step beyond Levetia's protection, it would need a new

shield.

And the hope was that new bulwark would come from the triple alliance. The threat of counterattack from Natra and Soljest would make Delunio untouchable.

“Yes… You may be right.” Sirgis nodded. “Forgive me. I’m supposed to be a loyal servant of Natra, and yet…”

Falanya shook her head. “This is your homeland. It’s only natural to be concerned.”

Sirgis gave an empty smile. “I surprise myself. I always considered my nation’s future when I was prime minister, but never to this extent. Now that I’m here in my homeland as an outcast…”

A far-off look entered his eyes. Falanya wavered at the sight of him.

“Um, Sirgis. You—”

“Hey.”

A voice abruptly cut between the two, and they whipped around.

Nanaki appeared from the dark.

“N-Nanaki, you should knock first.”

“It’s an emergency,” he said, brushing off Falanya’s protests. “The situation’s changed. You have to decide again whether or not you want to stay.”

“…What happened?” she asked with growing alarm.

“It’s war.”

The young man’s crimson eyes wavered mysteriously.

“Those Delunio guys are declaring war on Soljest.”

Several cloaked men moved down an empty alleyway. Delunio's Prime Minister Mullein led the way. Each person's face was tense, and even their gait held an ominous air.

The group's destination was an utterly dilapidated house.

"Your Excellency, I sense someone inside," a subordinate whispered from behind Mullein.

The prime minister quietly sniffed in amusement before opening the door.

"…Goodness. I must say I wasn't at all expecting to hear from *you*," he remarked.

A shadow stood alone in the musty building.

"What business might you have with me at this eleventh hour, Sir Sirgis?"

Sirgis, Delunio's former prime minister and Natra's current vassal, stood before the group.

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"You've got to be kidding! A war with Soljest?!"

As soon as Sirgis heard Nanaki's report, he forgot himself and shouted despite Falanya standing next to him.

"There must be some mistake!"

"I checked several sources. Each confirmed Delunio is raising an army against Soljest," Nanaki answered matter-of-factly. "The number of guards stationed around this mansion has doubled as well. Likely, they're meant to keep an eye on Falanya and are preparing to detain us if necessary. We could break through right now, but it'll only get harder if they add any more security."

"Ngh…"

Falanya could tell the situation had instantly turned on its head, but she kept

calm. Or, to be more accurate, she took a deep breath to quell her growing anxiety. Falling to pieces and making a fuss wouldn't help. Falanya was in Delunio on her brother's behalf. A cool head was crucial, lest she embarrass herself.

"Sirgis, do you know what's happening and why?"

Her even tone soothed Sirgis's agitation a bit, and he collected himself.

"Yes… It's likely, no, certainly, Delunio's attempt to endorse Princess Tolcheila."

"Endorse Princess Tolcheila?"

Sirgis nodded. "Prince Kabra took the throne by illegitimate means. He can claim that King Gruyere has fallen ill, but people will gossip regardless. It won't be long until Soljest realizes it was actually a hostile takeover. The former king was popular among his subjects. When the truth comes to light…"

"They'll inevitably revolt. And if Princess Tolcheila returns to Soljest as the rightful heir, she'll be well received."

"Yes. However, overwhelming support from the citizenry is no substitute for military aid. Without that, she can't take the throne. I expect Prince Kabra will seek to eliminate Princess Tolcheila's potential allies beforehand, but…"

"Delunio has already pledged its support… Yes, that does explain a lot."

The way things were going, the chaos thus far restricted to Soljest would erupt into an international conflict.

Prince Kabra, the favorite of Soljest's conservatives, or Princess Tolcheila, backed by Delunio's army. Who would emerge victorious?

"…What does Delunio gain from working with Princess Tolcheila now?"

"That's a private matter between the two, so I can offer only conjecture. However, the obvious answer is a defeated Soljest's land, people, and resources. As for long-term ambitions, the aim is…the Soljest Kingdom itself."

"What do you mean?"

"I speak of marriage. If Tolcheila ascends to the throne as Soljest's queen and marries King Lawrence, their children will inherit both nations. It's not far-fetched to posit that Soljest and Delunio may consolidate into one realm by the next generation."

The Delunio Kingdom, whose days were said to be numbered, might become a world power. Of course, such a feat would take decades, but the possibility was concerning, even for Natra.

Still, though…

Falanya drifted into thought. She found no flaw in Sirgis's assessment and

agreed with it. Yet something felt off.

Princess Tolcheila definitely planned this.

Provoking and subsequently crushing the prince so she could take over sounded exactly like something the princess would do.

But would she deliberately use Delunio to that end…?

Falanya didn't get along with Tolcheila but recognized the girl's talent. And knowing Tolcheila's abilities, Falanya couldn't help but wonder if she wrested control of Soljest from the inside out instead of using Delunio.

Getting Delunio involved demanded skill, but it also meant splitting the substantial profits in the end. Someone like Princess Tolcheila would never agree to that…

"Your Highness, let us return to Natra."

Sirgis's voice pulled Falanya from contemplation.

"Huh? R-return home?"

"Yes. Your Highness will be in danger if the two nations clash. Moreover, Natra's role in the alliance will become critical for both sides."

"That's… Ah!" Falanya gasped with realization. "Are you talking about which side Natra will take?"

Sirgis nodded. "Soljest and Delunio will soon face each other in battle. Two-thirds of our alliance are at odds. Both countries need the support of Natra, the remaining one-third."

"And if I stay here, Wein won't have a chance to ally with Soljest…because I'll essentially be a hostage of Delunio."

Falanya's circumstances aside, she had no idea if Wein would choose Soljest. However, the main takeaway here was Natra's ability to tip the scales.

"…I thought I could do more here, but it looks like it's out of our hands." Even if Falanya couldn't help her brother, there was no reason to actively get in his way. She tucked away her disappointment. "Sirgis, prepare to return home."

He bowed deeply and turned on his heel. However, just as he was about to leave the room…

"Sirgis." Falanya's tone suggested she sensed the trouble in the man's heart. "As quickly as possible, okay?"

"…Understood."

Sirgis left the room.

Forgive me, Princess Falanya.

Sirgis's mind whirled as he reviewed their preparations for departure.

I should still be able to contact him with the code word. What in the world is

Mullein planning? I need to know.

Sirgis buried his resolve deep within the recesses of his heart and slipped out of the building.

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"As you know, I am a busy man," Mullein said haughtily without bothering to take a seat. "Do make this quick."

He didn't show the slightest ounce of respect for his former superior but didn't seem particularly upset either. That was true to his personality. At any rate, Sirgis had more pressing issues.

"…Why did you ally with Eastern Levetia?"

"That's what you're worried about? I assumed you would ask about the upcoming war."

"There's that, too. But tell me about the situation with Eastern Levetia first."

"It was all for the money, of course," Mullein answered with naked disinterest. "As it stands, Delunio needs every bit of help from Eastern Levetia. That's how dire our circumstances have become." He shot Sirgis a dirty look. "All because of your failure."

"…!"

There was no denying Delunio's fall started with Sirgis, and Mullein was cleaning up his mess. No amount of banishment or confession would erase the truth of his mismanagement.

"…I accept full responsibility for Delunio's defeat against Prince Wein. Criticize and condemn me all you want. However, how will working with Eastern Levetia rectify that? What can Delunio possibly gain by leaving Levetia's protection?!"

"You're too sentimental, Sir Sirgis. What has Levetia ever done for us? The favorable policies you instated only made the Levetia officials arrogant," Mullein spat.

"You're a fool to think they'd save us in our hour of need. To Levetia, this country is a cowshed easily discarded at its earliest convenience. Haven't you realized this yourself? For all you did for Levetia, it offered no aid when Prince Wein bested you. Far from it. You were scorned and exiled.

"That was an interpersonal conflict. Levetia itself is a pure religion. I have no doubt it serves as a compass for the people. I grant there are a few degenerates, but most people are pious believers who will rise up to save Delunio."

“More sentimentality,” Mullein dismissed. “Your energy is better spent focusing on the triple alliance than some fantasy… But I suppose that ship has long sailed, hasn’t it?”

Sirgis gritted his teeth at Mullein’s lax treatment of this grave affair.

“…Do you mean to invade Soljest?”

“Yes. There’s no reason to let a perfect opportunity go to waste. We will support Princess Tolcheila and pilfer everything in sight.”

“Soljest has a Holy Elite! If you invade…”

“The prince overthrew that Holy Elite. I don’t see what there is to fear.”

Mullein raised a hand, and a few servants waiting silently nearby advanced on Sirgis. He stepped back nervously, but the house was narrow, affording him nowhere to go.

“Still, that isn’t to say I have no concerns at all. Especially where Natra is concerned.”

“Damn it, Mullein! You…!”

“Princess Falanya was kind enough to take in a poor soul like you. She won’t be going anywhere with you too battered to stand—Don’t kill him.”

The men accompanying Mullein nodded, and Sirgis was immediately struck by a flurry of blows.

“Gah!”

Heavy thuds echoed through the house, and it didn’t stop there. The burly soldiers mercilessly brutalized Sirgis.

“I was a bit excited when you first called me… This truly is a disappointment,” Mullein groused. He watched the blood fly from his former superior’s mouth and nose with every kick and punch. “Once, you took down political foes without remorse and hoarded everything for yourself like a common sewer rat. It had a profound effect on me. To think the same man who made Lawrence his obedient mouthpiece would speak against Eastern Levetia…”

Succumbing to the pain, Sirgis collapsed in a coughing fit. Mullein walked over and casually struck his head.

“Don’t make me laugh, scum. You think you can play the patriot now?”

“M-Mullein…”

“You know, I really owe you one. I intended to kill you here if you said anything funny…but it’s not even worth the effort!”

Mullein gave Sirgis a swift kick to the face. His victim yelped in anguish and curled up like a small animal.

The prime minister smiled and turned away. “I’m leaving. Thanks for wasting my time.” He left without looking back.

“Gwgh…”

Sirgis’s violent coughing filled the cramped house. Blood and tears blurred his vision, but he lacked the strength to wipe his eyes. His broken body spasmed with every breath.

Is this my penance…?

Sirgis failed to muster even the slightest outrage at Mullein, although he dearly wished he had. His furious mind burned, screaming that he deserved to rot here.

And that’s when he saw the god of death’s feet.

“…Sir Nanaki.”

There was no point asking the boy when he arrived. Nanaki silently stood there as if present all along.

“Are you here to kill me?” Sirgis asked between labored breaths.

It wouldn’t surprise him. After all, Sirgis secretly met with Delunio’s prime minister amid a crisis. Sparing him would be the stranger decision.

“I would have if you proved to be a traitor.” Nanaki’s voice was flat. He could have stabbed Sirgis with less effort than it took to snap a twig. “But tonight, I saw only an idiot.”

“‘An idiot,’ huh?”

“You knew it was dangerous to meet him alone yet did so anyway. And sure enough, you paid the price. Did you think you were some wise intellectual?”

“Heh, he-he… Yes, I suppose I did… H-ha-ha.”

Even Sirgis wasn’t sure why he did it. Meeting Mullein behind closed doors was never going to help anyone, but it was better than nothing. At any rate, this entire situation was a consequence of his actions. Sirgis had an obligation to settle things.

“…Sir Nanaki.” Sirgis smiled before flinching from agony. “Would you please kill me?”

“Why?” Nanaki shot back.

“To be honest… *Cough*… I might pass out from this conversation alone.”

Nanaki could tell Sirgis was right. The color rapidly drained from his face, and sweat poured down his forehead. The pain had to be unbearable.

“I have several broken bones, and as Mullein said, Princess Falanya will be stuck in Delunio if I’m unfit to travel. Regrettably, I don’t have the courage to end myself… So do it for me.”

“I can’t,” Nanaki replied immediately. “I kill traitors, not innocent allies. Not without Falanya’s permission, anyway. If you’re that serious…”

“What must I do?”

“Have Falanya fire you. Then I will.”

Sirgis was stunned but soon grinned.

“Yes, I see. In that case, I must ask Her High…”

Sirgis tried to stand, but the effort was in vain. His vision went dark.

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Officials swarmed Mullein upon his return to the royal court.

“Prime Minister, we’ve been looking for you.”

“Where were you at a time like this?”

Mullein was effectively the ruler of Delunio, and he’d disappeared on the precipice of an incursion into a foreign nation. The officials’ concern was expected.

The prime minister understood this and kept his tone even. He waved off incoming questions with an air of annoyance.

“Don’t make such a fuss. It was just minor business. More importantly, how are our military preparations?”

“Everything is proceeding as planned. We’ll be ready within a few days.”

“This is a race against time. Tell the generals we’re departing at the first opportunity.”

“Understood. As for the postponed ceremony and guests…”

The upcoming war wouldn’t solve all of Delunio’s issues. As Mullein issued a string of commands to his officials, one brought news he couldn’t ignore.

“Your Excellency, Princess Tolcheila arrived a short while ago. She’s waiting for you in the drawing room.”

“Idiot. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Mullein hurried to meet her. Tolcheila was vital to the plan, so he didn’t dare slight her.

“Please forgive my tardiness, Princess Tolcheila.”

“Oh, Sir Mullein.” Tolcheila’s head shot up as the prime minister entered the room. “No, I’m sorry for imposing on you. However, my anxiety grows the longer I try to face this alone.”

“I understand the feeling.”

Princess Tolcheila’s legitimacy and Delunio’s military—Mullein proposed

using both to reclaim the Soljest throne.

Tolcheila's delegation fell into utter disarray upon hearing of the coup—an understandable reaction. Some believed it was safest to hurry home, while others thought it would be dangerous to return unprepared.

Mullein was quick to approach the group and offered Delunio's army. The proposition must have appeared treacherous and enticing.

It doesn't take a genius to realize how perilous it is to allow a foreign nation to interfere in your nation's domestic affairs. Still, Tolcheila can't take Soljest without a force of her own.

The Soljest delegation likely came to the same conclusion since the princess accepted Mullein's proposition after a brief discussion.

"Fear not, Princess Tolcheila. Our soldiers are getting ready as we speak. I'm certain we shall overthrow that usurper, Kabra."

"That is very reassuring." Tolcheila smiled. "I was distraught when I learned of my brother's actions, but this serendipitous visit to your country has proved to be a silver lining."

"It's only natural to aid one's allies," Mullein answered pleasantly. His thoughts, however, were anything but.

Hmph, this princess is quite the little charmer, but a child nonetheless. She might think our army is hers to play with, but I'm *the one conducting the game.*

Should Princess Tolcheila become queen with Mullein's assistance, she'd have no choice but to listen to him. Soljest lost a reliable king and was on the brink of civil war. Tolcheila taking the throne wouldn't solve the inevitable rough recovery. And during that difficult time, Delunio would be Soljest's only option.

If I can bend Soljest to my will, I'll effectively become the leader of two nations. Natra will no longer pose a threat. Watch closely, Sirgis. I will travel down the path to your former glory.

Secret ambition burned in Mullein's heart while the girl across from him looked on in silence.

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His earliest memories were of tilling the fields on an empty stomach.

Barren earth surrounded him. Chill air. Uncultured people.

Like most remote areas, his hometown was a poor village far from civilization. He had no fond memories of his parents. Each day he was hit,

insulted, and put to work.

It was painful. However, what hurt most of all was the inability to comprehend what was painful, why, and how to escape it.

No one ever read to him. The rare life lesson came from watching his uneducated parents, but these were learned habits, not skills. How could any light reach his dark abyss of sorrow when his dirt-covered hands were perpetually empty?

Then one day, the Church and its priests came to the village.

He didn't understand at first. These newcomers seemed like government officials yet didn't put on airs. And unlike his parents, they didn't beat or criticize him. They didn't look down on him indifferently like the rest of the village. They were a new kind of human.

The boy's wariness quickly vanished.

This was thanks to their elegance, charity, and most of all, their scriptures.

"The scriptures are a gift from God. The text teaches us how to live in righteousness."

The boy didn't understand the priest's words at first, but emotions filled the cracks in his young heart at last.

To think something like this exists…

The scriptures taught him everything. The ways of heaven. The ways of earth. Humanity's weakness, ugliness, and nobility. The truth behind his agony. Potential dangers and pitfalls and the proper way to handle them.

It was mind-blowing. The world turned on its head, or perhaps it finally came into view. All his life, the child was no different than a clump of earth. He woke up, worked the fields, and went to bed. The scriptures finally made him feel like his own person.

These feelings persisted no matter how much time passed. By the time he knew the scriptures by heart, he was overcome with duty.

I will spread this message.

There were undoubtedly many others in this country. Children who—like his younger self—didn't know God's Word and were ignorant of the concept of a nation. Children like cracked, arid earth.

He wanted to give them rain—a blessed shower of enlightenment from the scriptures.

Priesthood won't be enough. I can't serve only a single village.

His heart made a decision.

I'll go to the capital and make a name for myself. I'll become great, greater

than anyone else, and plant churches everywhere.

He left the village soon after. The future promised countless changes, and the fire in his heart burned with the resolve to overcome anything…

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Sirgis woke and realized he was in his private room of the Delunio mansion.

"Ngh…"

Pain racked his body. Unable to sit up, he clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"Are you awake? How are you feeling?"

The question came from a lady-in-waiting. Sirgis slightly shifted his head.

"I'll be fine… Is Princess Falanya still here?"

"Yes. She instructed me to inform her when you stirred, Sir Sirgis. I will send word shortly."

The lady-in-waiting left to deliver the message, and Falanya appeared soon after.

"Are you awake, Sirgis?"

"…I'm sorry for burdening you."

"Nanaki told me what happened. That was very reckless."

"Indeed…"

Falanya took a chair next to Sirgis but said no more. She gazed at the wounded man and waited for the words locked in his heart to flow.

Eventually…

"I was born in a poor, remote village," he began. "The land was barren and empty. I thought I was fated to toil in those fields and shrivel away…until I encountered Levetia."

"…"

Falanya's silence urged him on.

"I was uneducated, and the Teachings of Levetia became my cornerstone. I felt called to spread the message and aspired to rise in the world to meet that conviction."

"You even became prime minister. That really is impressive."

Falanya's admiration was sincere, but Sirgis derided himself regardless.

"That success is precisely why I lost sight of my original aim. Bewitched by my own self-interests, I forgot Levetia's instruction to remain noble and pure. I grew obsessed with defending and expanding my authority."

Sirgis looked down at his hands. They felt much dirtier than the days when

they were caked in soil.

"My policies only favored Levetia because I wished for the authority to match a Holy Elite. Unsurprisingly, this is why no one came to my aid when I was banished."

"Did you resent Delunio?"

"Very much so," he answered. "I was furious and schemed for revenge. However, after running to the East and reflecting upon my life, I grew homesick. When I finally returned to Delunio and realized the situation…I immediately wondered if there was anything I could do to help," Sirgis concluded with a heavy sigh.

Falanya's words came slowly. "Sirgis, be honest. Do you still feel anything for Natra?"

"I haven't forgotten you are the one who took me in, Your Highness. I could never have returned here if I didn't serve you. But to leave Delunio like this…"

Falanya gave a small, understanding nod.

Then…

"Ah…thank goodness," she said with heartfelt relief. "I've worried this entire time that you might have room in your heart only for Delunio, but now our solution is simple."

"Your Highness…?"

"I'll turn things around. I doubt we have room to intervene here, but I think there's one more bit of trouble. Let's target that and work together."

"Wh-why would you go that far…?"

"Because I need your strength," Falanya declared. "I'm no match for my brother, so I require the support of my vassals. And if I intend to make a request of my best allies, powerless as I am, I have to do my best."

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Falanya didn’t care about the challenges ahead or the risk of failure. Bonding with her loyal vassals and marching forward together was the best reward she could offer.

“Promise me, Sirgis, that you’ll serve me for real when this is over.”

“…!”

Her eyes took his breath away. Their strength rivaled that of exceptional figures like Wein and Gruyere.

This girl is… If everything really does go well…

“I promise. I will devote the rest of my life to you, Princess Falanya.”

Chapter 5 | The Final Move

As tension between Delunio and Soljest rose in the West, an uneasy air loomed over the Earthworld Empire to the East. The feud between Second Imperial Prince Bardloche and Third Imperial Prince Manfred was the cause. Both factions suffered greatly the previous year thanks to First Imperial Prince Demetrio's fall from power, forcing each side to focus on recovery.

Bardloche was the first to regain some of his strength. He mobilized his troops as soon as he could encroach on his younger brother's domain and take Manfred down.

Unsurprisingly, Manfred didn't sit idly by. He rallied a counterattack, and the two sides clashed.

Then, after several days of scattered skirmishes and an endless staring contest…

"…Those guys played it safe again today, huh?"

One of Manfred's soldiers stared across the plain at Bardloche's army.

"They rant and rave but never attack. Where's their fighting spirit?"

His comrades offered their thoughts.

"Yeah, but we're not much different. All we did today was fire off some random arrows."

"I thought this was supposed to be a big, decisive battle. What gives?"

"…I just went with whichever prince looked like the winnin' horse. Guess I chose wrong."

"Keep it down, idiot…!"

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The careless, chatty soldiers glanced around. Fortunately, their superiors were nowhere nearby.

"…You guys agree, right? Neither side is lookin' too good."

Bardloche and Manfred. Defeat hung plain about the two princes. Originally, one of them was meant to take the throne, but Lowellmina dashed those plans.

"That goes double for us. Prince Manfred's army is just a ragtag bunch of bumpkins from the provinces…"

"I bet the enemy's havin' a rough time, too. Loyalty only goes so far."

"Can't argue that," one soldier replied, eyes still fixed on the opposition. "Still, today's just another stand-off."

"Stayin' in the army means eatin', so no complaints here… What's the top brass thinking?"

"Who knows? I hope they at least intend to win."

The soldiers' grievances and doubts floated into the air unanswered.

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"Everything is going according to plan."

"Yeah. Hate to admit it, though."

A mansion in a local town overlooked the staring contest. And in one of its rooms sat Bardloche and Manfred.

"I agree, but we're out of options."

The two faction leaders were in the middle of a clandestine meeting. As to why…

"This needs to hurt Lowellmina's sect."

Wein had assumed Lowellmina was the target of this battle. Sure enough, the princess was the intended victim.

"You're preparing to rile up those regions, right?"

"Yes. Inciting them one by one shouldn't be too difficult."

Some of Manfred's troops would secretly slip into each Imperial territory and sow chaos while the two armies were busy fighting.

"We'll place blame for the damage and injuries on Lowellmina. Think she'll take the bait?"

"She has no choice. Lowellmina has maintained her persona as a stalwart patriot of the Empire. She can't afford to ignore the people's distress."

The scenario was thus:

While tensions rose in the Empire, and Bardloche's and Manfred's armies

remained at an impasse, vassals “unrelated” to the situation would stir trouble in every region. Citing the deadlock as an alibi protected the princely brothers from suspicion and forced Lowellmina to deal with the fallout.

“Staring won’t cost us much money and resources, and Lowellmina’s faction will hemorrhage both.”

“She pulled one over on us before, but we’ll bring her down hard this time,” Bardloche said. He then sighed, irritated. “Still, our reputations will suffer.”

“We do what we must.”

Their armies would maintain the stand-off while Lowellmina was busy offering humanitarian aid. The downcast people of the Empire would undoubtedly wonder what their princes were playing at, but Lowellmina’s threat loomed so large that Bardloche and Manfred had no choice but to collaborate.

“Presently, our reputations can’t match Lowellmina’s. Therefore, we must throw them away and force our opponent to defend hers,” Manfred explained.

“…”

Bardloche remained unsatisfied, but his brother continued.

“Besides, a poor reputation can be fixed later. Once the Empire is prosperous again, history will summarize this contest for the throne in two short sentences.”

Bardloche sniffed. “You got a point there. Still… One of us will be pinned with the bad rep for all eternity.”

His piercing stare all but said, “And obviously, it’s gonna be you.”

Manfred returned his brother’s sharp gaze, and their silent war lasted for several seconds. Perhaps realizing the invisible sparks flying between them were meaningless, Bardloche switched topics.

“So when will Lowellmina make her move?”

“That’s the one question I can’t answer. But knowing our sister, it’ll be a hard fight. She’ll want to take as little damage as possible.”

“Prime Minister Keskinel and the West will get involved if we drag this out too long. Falcasso will go for the kill if it catches an opening.”

There were three nations with roads that connected East and West. Natra to the north, Mealtars in the center, and the Falcasso Kingdom to the south. The last of the trio had the route closest to the heart of the Empire. Earthworld and Falcasso clashed countless times in the past, and as leader of a military faction, Bardloche couldn’t make light of the old foe.

Oddly enough, Manfred shook his head. “There’s no need to worry. The prime minister can’t do much after mobilizing the Imperial army for his own purposes, and I hear Falcasso already has its hands full.”

“You mean last year’s famine?”

“That’s part of it, but it also looks like Eastern Levetia is trying to branch out. Falcasso’s busy dealing with it.”

“A turf battle between faiths, huh? What a bunch of idiots.” Bardloche stood abruptly.

“Oh? Are you saying you don’t believe in God, Bardloche?”

“No, I’ve got plenty of faith. The Emperor, the One True God, resides within the Earthworld Empire,” he replied. “We’re done here. If anything happens with Lowellmina, notify my subordinates.”

“Very well, but keep on your guard.”

“Thanks for pointing out the obvious. Just don’t betray me,” Bardloche spat on his way out the door.

Now alone, Manfred whispered, “Oh, I won’t. Not until Lowellmina is taken care of, anyway.”

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“They certainly are cunning.”

Lowellmina Earthworld sat in a corner of the Imperial palace in the heart of Grantsrale, capital of the Empire.

“Using such methods to tie me up at the eleventh hour… Hah.”

The bundle of documents in her hand described key information about Bardloche’s and Manfred’s armies. The princess had outside sources and spies who successfully infiltrated both camps. And the princes’ withering leadership made it easier to mine secrets. There was always the possibility of false testimony, but not many had the discipline to keep loyal and lied when their ship was clearly sinking.

Lowellmina was fully aware of her brothers’ scheme and all it entailed. However…

“It worked anyway!” Lowellmina groaned, gripping her head.

From absorbing First Prince Demetrio’s faction to demonstrating her political prowess by reestablishing trade relations with Patura, things had been looking up for Lowellmina in every way.

Unfortunately, that was also when her brothers decided to ally against her.

“Didn’t you two hate each other…?! Please just fight more and give me an easy win…!

Even if she had every detail about her foes, whether she could deal with them was another story entirely. Lowellmina could only sigh as she made a string of ridiculous demands.

"I would love to strike that devious pair head-on, but my position makes it difficult to sortie an army…"

Lowellmina's Patriot Faction had no military and promoted peaceful conflict resolution. Initially, this absence of firepower was involuntary; since her sect lacked steel swords and shields, it bolstered its defense with a mantra of love and peace.

Her ever-growing support could now muster an army if desired, but Lowellmina hoped to avoid that. Not because she'd suddenly become a pacifist. If it turned out that violence *was* the answer, she'd whale on both brothers in a heartbeat.

So why did someone like Lowellmina, possessed of all the makings of a berserker, wail in the palace like a lost kitten? There were two reasons:

First, her message of peace would come back to bite her if she resorted to force. The idea of an empress was already unprecedented. Lowellmina wanted to avoid losing popular support.

Second, Lowellmina had no experienced generals. They were already in the service of the two princes. And although a skilled negotiator, Lowellmina wasn't well versed in military tactics.

Even if I could raise an army, I doubt I would win. And victory wouldn't preserve my reputation… I suddenly feel exhausted.

Despite these hindrances, she had to find a way to resolve this predicament.

As the princes' pretend war lagged on, turmoil erupted across the Empire. This was a scheme devised to consume the resources required to ensure the populace's safety. Lowellmina's reputation would rise in the process, but to defeat her political opponents' troops, she needed soldiers and assets to back them. She couldn't let everything go to waste.

"Sooo that's why we absolutely must secure Wein's help. B-b-but…"

Lowellmina had an idea, but it was too risky on her own. To that end, she'd sent her trusted retainer Fyshe to Natra. She was due back any moment with news of the outcome.

"Now? Now? Now? Fyshe!"

Lowellmina anxiously waited for her subordinate until she finally heard familiar footsteps outside the door.

"Your Highness, I have returned."

“Fyshe!”

The person who entered was, without a doubt, Fyshe Blundell.

Lowellmina practically flew into her.

“I’ve been waiting. Nothing happened during your trip, right?”

“No. I have no major incidents to report,” Fyshe replied, handing a letter to Lowellmina. “Forgive my brevity, Your Highness, but this is a response from Prince Wein.”

“Thank you very much.” Lowellmina accepted the letter, broke the seal in one smooth motion, and looked it over. Then…

“Most excellent!” she exclaimed. “We can proceed as intended! Well done, Fyshe!”

“We have only your strategy to thank, Your Highness.”

Fyshe smiled at her lady’s relief. However, Lowellmina’s expression soon turned pensive.

“Still…I have some concerns about these added conditions. I see no reason to object… But what do you think he’s planning, Fyshe?”

“Ah, yes. It seems to be related to the present turmoil in Soljest, but Prince Wein didn’t offer much detail…”

“There was apparently a coup during the alliance ceremony in Delunio.”

“Yes. I heard the Delunio army mobilized to overthrow the usurper around the same time I left Natra.”

“I was not terribly concerned since the West is quite far away, but hmm…”

Lowellmina was silent for a few moments, though swiftly collected herself.

“No, pondering the matter here won’t solve anything. While I am concerned about events in the West, I must address the Empire’s troubles first.”

“In that case…”

“Yes, I’ll depart soon. I know you’ve only just returned, Fyshe, but please prepare yourself as well.” Lowellmina smiled.

“I wonder how the great enemy of our Empire, the Falcasso Kingdom, will welcome us?”

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“Yes, I suspect the Delunio and Soljest armies will be clashing forthwith,” Tolcheila mused, enjoying a piece of fruit in a room of Delunio’s state guest house. “Goodness, how will my big brother ever survive?”

The Delunio army totaled fifteen thousand and was bound for Soljest. The

enemy, led by Tolcheila's brother, Kabra, numbered ten thousand. Based on each side's marching pace, they were due to meet at any moment.

"Do you mean to suggest Soljest will lose, Your Highness?" the subordinate beside her inquired.

"I can't imagine another outcome. There's no reason for Soljest to win."

The subordinate frowned as if her words were incomprehensible.

"Our Soljest soldiers make up an elite force personally trained by King Gruyere. Regardless of number, Delunio's forces will inevitably fall behi—"

"That is precisely the reason," Tolcheila stated. "Father himself reared our troops. Even if they are Soljest's national army in name, one could say they are loyal members of the Gruyere Forces. How long will they tolerate my unaccomplished brother's orders?"

"I see… And if you account for Kabra stealing the throne…"

"Well, even my brother isn't hopelessly stupid. He likely has some plants in the ranks. If Delunio invades our homeland, many will prioritize patriotic duty and serve Kabra. He'll be able to mobilize his troops to a degree… Whether that's enough to steal victory, however…"

Regardless of ability, the commanders in Kabra's army could not utilize their full potential with an idiot at the helm. Tolcheila judged their failure was imminent.

"At any rate, Soljest will lose the first battle." Tolcheila sniffed. "Thereafter, Delunio shall truly taste defeat."

"Your Highness, does that mean…?"

"Yes. Soon enough, *a certain someone* will arrive in Delunio. I'd best prepare, too."

Tolcheila envisioned the events ahead and cracked a daring smile.

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Meanwhile, as Tolcheila planned her next steps…

A visibly frustrated Falanya sat and stared in a room of her mansion.

"Nghhh…"

"Your Highness, you needn't ruminate so much," Sirgis said from beside his perturbed, moaning master.

"But everyone is else locked in heated debate while I'm just sitting here like a log… It's so infuriating."

"It cannot be helped. There is only so much we can do."

Falanya was the guest of a foreign country, after all. Furthermore, unlike Tolcheila, she hadn't planned to start any trouble and brought the minimum number of delegation members. Falanya wanted to take action, but she lacked the personnel.

"Besides, your hand is not entirely empty, Your Highness."

"…I wonder if Nanaki and Zenovia have arrived safely."

Wein offered Falanya two pieces of advice to prepare her as a politician.

The first was never to let an opportunity pass her by. Even if it fell into her lap, there was no guarantee it'd stay there forever. If glory was right in front of her, it was best to snatch it.

The second was to seize control of the situation. Grabbing whatever chance came along was important, but there wasn't always going to be one. Someone could interfere at the last second. At times like those, she couldn't sit around waiting for a blessing to fall from the heavens.

Be proactive, Falanya. Be the kind of political player who wraps the whole world up in their will.

Falanya followed that advice and made a move with her two greatest cards, Zenovia and Nanaki.

"Do you think this will work, Sirgis?"

"Unfortunately, I don't have enough information to predict the outcome. However, if I must say anything, it is this: Even if this endeavor fails, no one else could have conceived of or executed such a plan, Your Highness." Sirgis's words lightened her heart a shade.

Someone knocked on the door, and a servant entered.

"Pardon me. Princess Falanya, I bring two matters of import."

"What are they?"

"First, a guest has arrived at the mansion."

"A guest?"

Falanya and Sirgis exchanged puzzled looks.

A guest.

There were no meetings scheduled today.

"Second, our members keeping watch over the palace have relayed a message. It seems a noble has arrived."

This cleared away Falanya and Sirgis's confusion.

Given the timing, this unexpected visit had to be the work of Princess Tolcheila. There was no mistaking it.

"Do you know who this noble is?"

The servant nodded. “The director of Levetia’s Gospel Bureau, Caldmellia.”

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“Caldmellia is here…?”

Prime Minister Mullein grimaced at the news.

“Yes. She wishes to speak with His Majesty… What shall we do?”

“She’s a top Levetia authority with the power to act on behalf of the Holy King. We can’t refuse her. Call King Lawrence to the audience hall. I’ll be there soon.

Mullein’s mind raced while his subordinate left to carry out his command.

Why now?

Maybe it was all a coincidence, but the possibility it wasn’t remained on the table.

I need to keep my guard up.

Mullein clicked his tongue and headed to the audience room. King Lawrence was already present, as were his guards and vassals.

“Your Majesty, thank you for meeting with me.” Mullein bowed.

Lawrence rattled a shaky reply. “I-it is fine. M-more importantly, Mullein, I heard someone from the Gospel Bureau arrived.”

“Yes, but you needn’t worry. Please leave everything to me.”

Mullein saw no point in explaining. He cut their conversation short and faced the audience hall entrance. The heavy door opened, and a single woman stepped inside.

“I sincerely apologize for my sudden visit. I am Caldmellia, the director of the Gospel Bureau.”

Everyone gaped. According to reports, Caldmellia was an old crone, yet the woman before them possessed glowing skin, glossy hair, and youthful radiance. She could pass for someone in her thirties. Perhaps even in her twenties.

Still, all present understood at a glance that she was a very different kind of woman. And a dangerous one at that.

“Ah, oh, um…”

Caldmellia’s perilous yet irresistible charm left Lawrence at a loss for words. Mullein, however, glanced at the king’s clumsy appearance and managed to regain his composure.

“We bid you welcome, Lady Caldmellia,” Mullein greeted with all insincerity. “Well then, might I ask what brings you to our nation? If you are

here for leisure, please enjoy Delunio's many vistas to your heart's content."

"I assure you I will explain… But please wait just a moment," Caldmellia replied with an apologetic look.

She appeared out of nowhere yet expected *them* to wait? What was going on?

While Mullein wrestled with the confusing situation, a small shape appeared in the entranceway behind Caldmellia.

"Oh, am I tardy? I do beg your pardon."

The figure was Tolcheila.

Mullein was further mystified. Not the least bit shocked by the director's presence, Tolcheila readily joined the audience, standing by Caldmellia to offer greetings. The princess's arrival was indeed no accident.

"Princess Tolcheila, what is going on…?"

"I invited her. Her Highness is involved in my plan," Caldmellia answered in Tolcheila's stead.

The two were connected. They were in league together. As soon as Mullein realized this, an ominous chill ran up his spine.

"Well then, might I ask again what your business is, Lady Caldmellia?"

It was a dangerous yet inevitable question, and Mullein failed to hide his concern. Caldmellia's crimson lips lifted into a bright smile.

"I'm here to deliver an ultimatum to the Delunio Kingdom."

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A stir ran through the audience hall.

"'Ultimatum'…?"

"What is she talking about?"

"Why would someone of Levetia say such a thing?"

All present expressed bafflement and agitation. Mullein turned to them with a raised voice.

"Silence! You stand before the king!"

The harsh rebuke returned silence to the audience hall. The prime minister knew this didn't solve the main issue, though.

"Lady Caldmellia, what exactly are you implying?"

"I imply nothing… Don't tell me you intend to make excuses after all that's happened?" she said. "Delunio has sorely betrayed the Teachings of Levetia, and we cannot turn a blind eye. The Church will regard Delunio as an explicit enemy

unless this issue is promptly addressed."

"That's ridiculous!" Mullein cried. "Delunio has ever been a fervent supporter of Levetia! You dare to falsely accuse us of betrayal?!"

Mullein's tone turned ragged as thoughts piled on top of each other. He always knew that Levetia might intervene in a war between Western nations. Yet while Delunio was an active participant, the primary conflict was the sibling rivalry in Soljest. Mullein assumed the Church would only intervene once the battle was more or less decided.

However, here it was, making a one-sided declaration before the skirmish officially began.

He couldn't grasp Caldmellia's intentions. And in a political atmosphere like this one, failing to read his foe's motives could only mean they were a step ahead.

"What sin has our nation committed that you would accuse us of lies?" Mullein demanded.

Caldmellia gave a brilliant smile. "For becoming Eastern Levetia's vanguard and attacking Soljest." The words were a damning knife thrust into Delunio's heart. "That is your sin."

"———!" Mullein was shaken by the blow.

Eastern Levetia.

If only the war with Soljest had been the only complication. He never imagined he would hear of Eastern Levetia here.

"According to our earlier investigations, Delunio has received significant support from Eastern Levetia. Moreover, the Soljest invasion is an act of aggression by Eastern Levetia through Delunio."

Mullein had no immediate response.

Delunio had indeed received aid from Eastern Levetia and invaded Soljest. These two points were unrelated, but it wasn't inconceivable to conflate them.

Lawrence, unable to contain himself, exclaimed, "Y-you're wrong! Th-that wasn't why we were heading for Soljest!" His gaze fell on Tolcheila, who watched everything in silence. "Our motive was to overthrow the treasonous Kabra and return the crown to its rightful heir! Isn't that right, Princess Tolcheila?!"

Lawrence was correct. Delunio's forces set out only after conferring with the Soljest princess and securing her approval. The nation never acted on its own. The situation would be rectified once she confirmed this.

And so Tolcheila…

“Whatever do you mean?”

…kicked Delunio off its ladder with the sunniest smile.

“I don’t recall any of that.”

“What?”

Lawrence wasn’t the only one perplexed. Everyone else in the room felt the same. Delunio rallied its warriors to help put Princess Tolcheila on the throne. That was both the nation’s official stance and the unequivocal truth.

But everything had been turned on its head by Princess Tolcheila herself.

We’ve been framed!

Mullein realized what had happened and immediately groaned.

Tolcheila’s permission to mobilize. Caldmellia’s condemnation for it. And now Tolcheila’s denial. There was no longer any doubt. The two were working together, and this was part of their plot.

“Wh… What’s going on?!” Lawrence exclaimed, jumping up from his throne. “My country and soldiers were trying to help you, Princess Tolcheila!”

Caldmellia turned to the princess beside her.

“Is that right, Princess Tolcheila?”

“Oh dear. I fear I’m still drawing a blank.”

Tolcheila and Caldmellia beamed with obvious derision, and Lawrence fumed.

“G-guards!” The soldiers trembled, startled by their typically meek king’s roar of anger. “Arrest them! I won’t forgive any insult to our nation!”

“Goodness. What do you think, Lady Caldmellia?”

“He hoped to talk his way out of the situation but resorted to violence upon realizing his failure. This simply won’t do.”

Tolcheila and Caldmellia remained unfazed. This only provoked Lawrence further. That’s when Mullein stepped in.

“Please wait, Your Majesty! Assaulting them will only give Levetia more leverage!”

“Are you suggesting we leave them alone?! Quit screwing around! Guards!” Lawrence again called for backup.

However, Mullein swiftly vetoed the order. “Stop! No one move!”

“H-hey.”

“What should we do?”

“It’s the king’s order…”

“Yeah, but…”

The guards looked at each other and debated whether to obey their lawful master, Lawrence, or their true master, Mullein.

It was Mullein who seized the reins of this farce.

“His Majesty is exhausted! Escort him to his room immediately!”

As the one on more familiar terms with the guards, Mullein ordered them to forcibly drag Lawrence from the audience hall. Caldmellia watched with glee.

“Lady Caldmellia, I have confirmed receipt of Levetia’s ultimatum,” Mullein said. “The circumstances were quite sudden, so please allow us some time!”

Caldmellia giggled. “He-he, that’s true. In light of this pleasant spectacle, I shall wait several days… Let’s end matters here for today.”

The director of the Gospel Bureau calmly turned her back on Mullein and left. Tolcheila spun around to follow after.

“Princess Tolcheila…! Damn you…!”

Mullein couldn’t stop himself from cursing the girl. Her response was upbeat.

“He-he, I shall retire as well. An important detail may come to me with a good night’s sleep.”

Tolcheila left the audience hall, her gait infuriatingly airy.

Once the stars of this drama were gone, Mullein beat the wall, furious.

“Your Excellency…!”

A subordinate immediately rushed over, and Mullein seized him by the collar.

“This is a gag order. Not a single word of this can leave this room! And confine Lawrence to his chambers, no matter what. Understand? Everything will be a waste if he runs wild now!”

“U-understood!”

“Send a messenger! Our forces are not to move another inch! Do not lay a single finger on Soljest!”

“But, Your Excellency, if all has gone according to plan, we are already on the verge of combat. The message won’t make it in—”

“Silence! Just do it! And find Yuan! Immediately arrest every Eastern Levetia member in the palace! Every last one in the entire country!”

“A-are you certain of this?”

“I doubt holding them will be enough to stop Eastern Levetia as a whole, but the damage will spread if we don’t keep them in check! Go!”

Mullein’s subordinates scattered like baby spiders.

Damn it, I can’t believe this…!

He’d had a bad feeling the moment he saw Tolcheila and Caldmellia next to

each other, but Mullein never imagined this turn of events.

Was this Tolcheila's plan all along?

Tolcheila desired the throne, but King Gruyere and her brother, Kabra, were in the way.

She sent Kabra into a panic by making her ambitions public. Then she deliberately left Soljest to incite his frenzy. Tolcheila used her brother to eliminate her troublesome father.

With that done, the princess used Delunio to depose her brother. She discerned the nation's intentions and successfully pushed it to mobilize against Soljest.

However, Tolcheila knew Delunio would interfere with her rule if she borrowed its strength. Thus, the final stage of her plan was to remove that inconvenient debt via Levetia.

The whole thing is absurd… But she has me right where she wants me!

Where did he go wrong? Was it because he accepted Eastern Levetia's aid? Was it because he tried to take advantage of the chaos in Soljest? Or was it because he underestimated Tolcheila, seeing her as merely a young girl?

At any rate, I need to find a way out of this…

Mullein mulled over his options until servants came running back to him.

"Your Excellency! Yuan is not in his room!"

"Eastern Levetia is nowhere to be found! Their rooms are completely empty!"

"What…?!"

This was no coincidence. They'd recognized what was happening and escaped.

"…Find them! They couldn't have gotten far!"

Mullein's mind raced. Delunio's position would grow increasingly tenuous if he failed to catch Yuan and the other members of Eastern Levetia. He managed to buy a few extra days with Caldmellia, but what kind of counterattack could he devise in that time?

If all else fails…

He had to survive. Even if it meant throwing everything else to the wolves.

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Mullein's gag order failed, and news of the incident in the Delunio palace spread among the castle town's leaders.

“As Your Highness predicted, the turmoil has escalated…”

“Still, I never expected Levetia to show up here.”

This information had slipped through the cracks and reached Falanya’s group as well. As to how her delegation stayed in the loop despite little connection to the Delunio palace…

“Speaking of surprises, I’m shocked that you came here.”

Falanya looked across at Yuan, the missionary and cardinal Mullein was hunting frantically.

He and his compatriots had secretly made their way to Falanya upon learning of Caldmellia’s arrival.

“You must have sensed the immediate danger.”

“Mission work requires a sharp intuition. We’ve already sent word to the faithful in each region. They’ll all go into hiding.”

This was a matter of life and death, yet Yuan smiled. Falanya was both astounded and impressed.

“Nevertheless, aren’t there safer places than with me?” Falanya asked.

“Only if I wished to run away. However, as I intend to stay in this land and watch how things develop, there’s no better protection.”

Falanya was Natra’s representative, and now that Caldmellia’s appearance had caused an uproar, Delunio wouldn’t want to upset the princess, let alone subject her to harm. The government would be hesitant to touch Yuan and his people while they were under Falanya’s protection, even if they were discovered.

“Still, I assumed we’d be refused. You have my deepest gratitude for taking us in, Princess Falanya.”

“As a member of the Natran royal family who accepted the oppressed Flahm, I have inherited a tradition of tolerance,” Falanya said with a grin. “At least, I’d like to say as much. The truth is I did so because it seemed practical.”

“Please don’t worry. My own faith is still lacking. I trust gold on a scale more than faith in humanity,” Yuan answered lightly. “However, we have been chased out of the palace. Excluding the information we gathered prior to our escape, I don’t see how we can be of much use…”

“That alone is priceless. I’ll ask you for more details tomorrow. Let’s end here for today. I’m sure your presence puts your subordinates at ease.”

“Well then, I shall do just that.” Yuan bowed and left. He maintained an easygoing attitude, but the cataclysm of events in Delunio surely left a lot on his mind.

The man beside Falanya was the same.

"Sirgis, I know this situation is hard for you, but you should try to rest, too."

Caldmellia's arrival pushed Delunio into a corner almost instantly. Undoubtedly, it would be difficult for Sirgis to rest, knowing his homeland was in such a state. When Falanya saw his anguished face, she feared he might collapse at any moment.

Sirgis must have realized this, for he nodded. "…Understood. Please excuse me."

"Of course. We can revisit this discussion later."

Falanya watched Sirgis leave. Now she had the room to herself. Nanaki was typically hiding in the dark corners, but he was absent. For once, Falanya was truly alone. This was no time to rest, though.

Director Caldmellia of the Gospel Bureau…

She'd heard from Wein that Caldmellia was a nuisance of the highest order. What sort of deal did Tolcheila strike to get her here?

At this rate, Delunio will be swallowed by its neighbors.

In the West, being named an enemy of Levetia was a death sentence. Not only that, Delunio was a profitable nation right next to the Old Capital. There was no question other countries would plot to take advantage of the situation and carve up chunks of Delunio for themselves.

Falanya promised Sirgis she would help save his homeland if he agreed to become her faithful vassal. But at this rate, she'd be unable to uphold her end of the agreement.

Nanaki and Zenovia are on the move… Yet even if they succeed, it'll be tough to stop this.

One more. She needed just one more move. How would she find one on her own this late into the game?

Falanya was lost in thought when a *clunk* sounded just outside the window.

"…?"

The princess looked in the direction of the noise and couldn't believe her eyes.

Someone was there.

Falanya nearly shouted in surprise but caught the words at the last second. She knew this person standing with their feet against the window frame.

"Ninym?!"

Falanya rushed over to open the window. This visitor was unmistakably Wein's aide, Ninym.

“Shh. Please keep quiet, Princess Falanya,” she whispered as she soundlessly slipped into the room.

“Huh? Wh-why are you here?”

Falanya hadn’t heard anything about Ninym coming to Delunio. It was a total surprise.

“Prince Wein sent me. I apologize for my sudden appearance, but this was our only option since we didn’t know the truth of the situation.”

Delunio was a Western nation that rejected the Flahm. With war on the horizon, Falanya was essentially all but a well-guarded hostage. The estate was already being watched. Obviously, Ninym hadn’t waltzed in through the front door, but Falanya was shocked to see the other girl all the same.

“Princess Falanya, are you injured or suffering from any discomfort?”

“No, I’m fine. The mansion is under surveillance, but I’m free for the most part.”

“I’m relieved to hear that. Nanaki is always with you, but I thought if by some chance he wasn’t…” Ninym paused, and a question occurred to her. “Your Highness, where is Nanaki?”

As Falanya’s guard, he definitely should have been with her, yet he was nowhere to be found.

“Oh, um, I asked him to do me a favor. He’s out.”

“He left your side in this emergency?”

Ninym’s eyes narrowed. Falanya faltered under that gaze but remained tough.

“Y-yes, but it was important.”

Falanya saw Ninym as an older sister but was ready to take the blame for Nanaki’s absence. The princess steeled herself and stared back into Ninym’s crimson eyes.

The two looked at each other for a moment, but it was Ninym who gave in.

“If you insist, Princess Falanya, then I suppose there’s no use dwelling on it. However, I will remain by your side until he returns.”

“Please do. Thank you.”

Falanya sighed, relieved, then collected herself. “So did you really come all this way just to make sure I was safe?”

“No. I’m also here to deliver this from Prince Wein.”

Ninym offered a wax-sealed letter. Wein had purposely sent his loyal aide to ensure it was delivered safely. That alone spoke to the message’s importance.

“…”

This made Falanya hesitant to accept the letter. Her brother entrusted her

with this trip abroad, and she wanted to meet his expectations. She feared this letter would urge her to return home.

Falanya understood Wein's concern but wanted him to trust that she would see this matter through to the end.

"Princess Falanya?"

"S-sorry. I'll read it." She accepted the letter from Ninym and looked it over. The imminent plea to return home—was nowhere to be found.

Stunned, Falanya reread it two, then three times.

"Ninym, when did Wein plan all this?"

"Around the same time as the coup in Soljest."

This message was Wein's helping hand for his little sister making waves in Delunio—a lifesaver. It was the move Falanya had been waiting for. She couldn't help but shiver.

Her brother had predicted everything that would occur following the uprising in Soljest.

"…Honestly, all I can say is, I'd expect nothing less of my brother…"

"He also said you are free to disregard this letter if he's overstepped his bounds."

"No, no, I wouldn't waste Wein's efforts. Now… Yes, now we can do something."

An image materialized in Falanya's mind, the solution to all their problems.

The princess trembled with immense joy. Did Wein ever feel this way? This sense of omnipotence, like everything was in the palm of your hand…

"Okay!" Falanya slapped her cheeks.

She had to get a grip. Getting drunk on this euphoria would only trip her up, and unlike Wein, she was a rookie. Opportunity or not, Falanya had to reach out carefully and keep her wits about her.

"Ninym, I'd like to ask for your help. There's something that must be done right away."

"I understand… What would you have me do?"

Falanya grinned just like her brother.

"Something wicked, of course."

“Phew, that’s the last of it. Fiiiiinally.”

Wein looked up from his paperwork, tossed away his pen, and stretched. The prince was still in his study at Willeron Palace.

“I’ve got less work these days, but it seriously takes forever without Ninym around,” he grumbled.

Wein’s vassals had taken on a good percentage of his duties, but he hadn’t been able to enjoy any of the extra free time since sending Ninym to Falanya.

…If all went well, Ninym should be with Falanya right about now.

Wein’s thoughts turned to his trusted aide.

Knowing Ninym, she’d find Falanya without issue. The real question was what came after, how Falanya would react to his letter.

Whatever happens, this is a perfect chance to measure Falanya’s growth.

Would she be trampled by the trials ahead or overcome them?

If Falanya nabs victory, then…

Wein sank into thought, alone in his office.

All while sporting a ferocious smile.

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To get straight to the point, the extra time granted to Delunio didn’t help in the least.

Yuan’s runaway group was nowhere to be found, and Tolcheila refused to change her position. The messenger deployed to stop the army wasn’t going to make it in time, either.

All of this meant one thing, Delunio had lost.

Damn it all. I can’t believe this…!

Mullein gritted his teeth. Excluding guards, there were three other people in the palace conference room: King Lawrence, Princess Tolcheila, and Caldmellia, the director of the Gospel Bureau.

"Well then, shall we resume our conversation?"

Caldmellia was the first to break the silence.

"We, the Teachings of Levetia, do not recognize Eastern Levetia as a proper denomination. We publicly denounce its followers as heretics. Naturally, this means no affiliated people, organizations, or countries shall be tolerated. Delunio colluded with Eastern Levetia and used Princess Tolcheila's rightful inheritance as a pretext to invade the Soljest Kingdom. We cannot turn a blind eye to such behavior… Do you agree, Princess Tolcheila?"

Tolcheila nodded with a pained look. "As soon as I heard of my brother's mutiny, I tried to return home but was locked away in my mansion. I daresay he threatened to trap me there."

"Princess Tolcheila…!" Mullein couldn't contain his rage, and Tolcheila cowered like a child.

"Oh, how very frightening. An innocent young girl like me could only comply under such duress. You understand, don't you, Lady Caldmellia?"

"Yes, of course."

The two women no longer hid the fact that they were in cahoots, conversing amiably. They'd probably start discussing how best to dismantle Delunio soon.

Is this really it?

Mullein had no choice but to accept it. He'd been bested. That didn't spell the end, though. Failure taught him how low he'd sink to survive.

I hoped Lawrence wouldn't be present.…

Mullein looked over at the silent king. Lawrence had been locked in his room since the incident in the audience hall, yet he'd somehow heard about this meeting and demanded to attend. Caldmellia requested Lawrence's presence as well, leaving a reluctant Mullein with no choice.

Well, it couldn't be helped. Don't resent me, Lawrence.

Mullein turned away from his puppet to face Caldmellia and Tolcheila. "I understand your grievances." He paused for a moment. "Moreover—I admit everything. Our nation has indeed colluded with Eastern Levetia."

Tolcheila's and Caldmellia's eyes immediately narrowed. They'd planned to attack Delunio after Mullein made his excuses. They hadn't expected him to accept their accusations outright.

"You've suddenly become quite noble. Have you had a change of heart?"

“As a pious follower of Levetia, I wish only to be honest, Princess Tolcheila.”

“What confidence.” Tolcheila scoffed. “You admit to conspiring with Eastern Levetia yet dare call yourself faithful? Perhaps you wish to test God’s benevolence? Surely, you agree that you’ve crossed a line.”

“Testing God’s benevolence?! I speak from the heart. Neither statement is a contradiction of the other,” Mullein asserted.

Tolcheila stared at him questioningly.

“…Ah, I see. So that’s how it is,” Caldmellia remarked with a small smile. She realized the prime minister’s intention first.

“Delunio’s affiliation with Eastern Levetia was neither the will of the people nor my own. Everything was by order of King Lawrence himself!” Mullein declared.

The guards in the conference room broke into a commotion—an expected reaction. After all, Mullein had just blatantly accused the king.

All right, everything starts here!

It was Mullein who took over Delunio after Sirgis’s downfall. It was also his decision to contact Eastern Levetia. Lawrence hadn’t done a single thing. Pinning the king with the guilt was a bald-faced lie.

But so what?

“Who are we vassals to go against the king’s word?! However, your arrival has allowed us to finally end his reign of tyranny! The sincere prayers of the people, myself included, have been answered!”

It was a perfect example of the blame-shifting that future historians would unanimously criticize. Mullein put the king’s head on a silver platter in a filthy move to save himself.

But really, was that so wrong? Mullein’s life was the only one that mattered, so it was natural to abandon lord and country. Patriotism and loyalty were nothing more than foolish sentiments touted by idiots.

Lawrence, I’ll take your life and survive…!

How did the king respond to this upset?

Did the color drain from his face? Was he visibly livid? Lawrence probably didn’t understand what was happening and would likely have a blank expression.

With derision, delight, and mild curiosity, Mullein glanced at the foolish puppet king.

“…So it was all true.”

The answer was none of the above. Lawrence’s calm air rattled Mullein. He

thought the guards would have to subdue a furious king, yet no such action was necessary. Lawrence peered into Mullein's eyes but seemed to be looking beyond them.

"Then even *that* must be true…" the king muttered.

While Mullein considered what that meant, the conference room door burst open. A messenger came running in.

"Pardon me! We've just received an initial report from the battlefield!"

The battlefield. The war between Soljest and Delunio.

"Hmph. There is no longer any point, but go on."

Tolcheila won the moment the battle between the two nations became a reality.

Kabra's failure was more convenient for her, but she had full confidence she could handle him in victory or defeat.

"You there. What of the Soljest army?" she asked.

The messenger hesitated, but replied, "Yes, well, we've received news that the Soljest army has been routed."

"I see. So Delunio is the victor."

It was a reasonable enough conclusion. Tolcheila wondered if her brother was dead or captured…

"No, Delunio's generals were captured as well, and they are presently retreating."

Everyone in the conference room froze.

"What are you talking about?" Tolcheila asked.

The two armies clashed, but both were forced to flee instead of one emerging as the clear winner. Tolcheila puzzled over this nonsense and hit upon a possibility.

"—Don't tell me Natra interfered?!"

Natra was the last member of the triple alliance. As a country with ties to Delunio and Soljest, it should have remained a spectator. Did it abandon noninterference?

How did the Natran army arrive so fast?! No, I'm certain Prince Wein could pull it off. But if both sides were forced to flee, does that mean Natra faked neutrality? A noncommittal stance could have also allowed Natra to wait for an opportunity! Caldmellia and I will need to draw up a counterattack…

As one might expect, Tolcheila processed this unforeseen event with lightning speed. Her keen tactical mind was the genuine article. Unfortunately, the truth this time was beyond anything she could have imagined.

“No, it wasn’t the Natran army.”

The messenger spoke as if unable to believe it himself.

“The victors were commanded by King Gruyere.”

“————What?!”

A wave of shock rippled through the conference room.

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“Delunio’s and Soljest’s forces combined were shy of thirty thousand.”

A tent sat on the border between Delunio and Soljest. It was only a short while after the battle, yet both armies were gone.

“We, on the other hand, numbered slightly under three thousand. That’s ten times less.”

One of the people in the tent was a man of immense girth. He was King Gruyere, the former king of Soljest.

“Ah, what an exhilarating battle that was.”

“Ridiculous… This can’t be…” moaned Kabra, the failed usurper who lay bound before his father. The Delunio commander was tied up next to him.

“Do not despair, my son. You noticed my ambush, after all, and your counterattack was a valiant effort. But the battle was already a melee, so you were simply too late,” Gruyere explained cheerily.

Kabra shot his parent a furious scowl. “How, Father?!”

“How what?”

“You were supposed to be locked away! Even if you *did* manage to escape, where did you get these soldiers?! Soljest’s troops follow *my* orders!”

“Ah, that. I have a very special friend, you see.”

Gruyere’s gaze shifted to the two figures next to him.

One was a Flahm with white hair and crimson eyes—Falanya’s servant, Nanaki.

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“In other words, you’re here to take me into custody.”

Shortly before Delunio and Soljest opened fire, Gruyere addressed his unexpected guest while confined in a detached villa.

“Evidently, Prince Wein’s little sister has a keen eye.”

Nanaki came to Gruyere on Falanya’s orders to secure the king.

Princess Tolcheila plans to fight under the pretext of reclaiming a throne that has been wrongfully stolen, but she isn’t the only person who can use this logic. Since King Gruyere was the one actually ousted, there’s a good chance he wants it back, too.

That was Falanya’s thought process. She’d offer to help Gruyere reclaim his crown, thus making him an ally. This was a means to an end, of course. Falanya’s primary aim was to stop Tolcheila from involving Delunio in her schemes.

Unfortunately, Gruyere’s reaction to her proposal couldn’t have been more lackluster.

“Frankly, I’ll pass,” he said. “This is the long-awaited showdown between my two children, and as a parent, I want to see the result. If I run now, I’ll just be watching while you cart me off, right? Whether I’m here or there changes little, and moving around sounds like a pain.”

Gruyere took a bite of the fruit in his hand and slapped his barrel belly. This wasn’t any kind of bargaining ploy; he really was that lazy.

Nanaki remained perfectly calm, recalling Falanya’s orders.

I hear King Gruyere can be difficult to please, so an offer to escape house arrest may not be enough. In that case…

“Instead of being hauled away, why not join the fun?” Nanaki proposed.

Gruyere raised an eyebrow.

“We have three thousand soldiers who will obey you. Test whether your children can beat them.”

“Together, Soljest’s and Delunio’s armies exceed twenty thousand strong. Are you suggesting I face them with a scant force of three thousand?”

“You can’t do it, then?”

“Don’t make me laugh,” Gruyere replied as his megalith body radiated with an invisible aura of overwhelming might. “Okay. I’ve been pretty bored lately. I could use a cheap laugh.”

“Then let’s go. Get ready,” Nanaki brusquely instructed the former king.

Gruyere’s shoulders shook with delight, but he had one last question. “I’ve been meaning to ask, where did you get three thousand soldiers?”

“From Marden,” Nanaki answered. “Zenovia ordered the troops to follow your commands.”

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And now, back to the present.

Gruyere led the Marden forces to a magnificent victory, toppling both sides.

"My, what a world we live in. To think there'd come a day when I'd command a Marden army."

"I am equally shocked, King Gruyere," responded a man who stood beside Nanaki. This was Borgen, one of Zenovia's generals. "Our training was designed to prepare us for *you*, after all."

As neighbor to the Soljest Kingdom, Marden was well aware of the country's strength and the threat it posed. Therefore, Zenovia instituted a daily regimen to ensure her soldiers were ready at a moment's notice. No one imagined this would be the result of that effort.

"Soldiers need strength, of course, but the way yours split into small groups and covertly returned to me was impressive. It made ambushing my son easy. Is that skill a carryover from your Liberation Army days?"

"Yes. A certain nation refused to send aid, so our training was based entirely on such methods." Borgen's comment was dripping with sarcasm, much to Gruyere's delight. The general mentally clicked his tongue before continuing. "I am equally impressed by Your Majesty's leadership. When you said we would be up against nearly thirty thousand, I thought we ought to stick to a ranged hit-and-run tactic. This will make excellent reference for future battles with your nation.

"You can keep serving under me if you prefer," Gruyere offered.

"Surely you jest," Borgen said, rejecting the king point blank. "What's our next move? We've captured both commanders. Shall we pursue Delunio?"

"No, let's head back to the capital. The government can't function without Kabra or me, and I'll never get to enjoy my hobbies until we've got the basic stuff covered."

"Understood. We shall prepare to withdraw."

Borgen swiftly issued the order to his subordinates while Gruyere looked in the direction of the Delunio Kingdom.

"Now then, what will my daughter do?"

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DON’T. SCREW. WITH. MEEEEE!

Tolcheila clenched her fists as her heart screamed furiously.

Now that Father has taken down Kabra, I don’t have a just claim to the throne!

Soljest’s conservatives wouldn’t accept the idea of a ruling queen easily. Tolcheila needed a win against a traitor like Kabra, a brilliant achievement to bolster her standing. And Gruyere stole it right out from under her.

Obviously, the people would want Gruyere to reclaim his title, and he’d be more than happy to accept. Kabra would be sentenced to death or put under house arrest in the countryside. Tolcheila would return to her original position—No, if she was criticized for inviting the interference of a foreign nation, she might be sent away with her brother.

“That report must be mistaken…!”

“I confirmed it countless times. Both armies have indeed been routed, and King Gruyere has risen as the victor!” the messenger said.

Tolcheila’s desperate hope met a bitter end. She had no idea where Gruyere managed to find soldiers, but her plan was ruined. She had no choice but to accept that.

However, this was only a half loss.

Fine! I lost the battle for the throne! But that doesn’t mean I’ll let Delunio get away!

Tolcheila’s heart raged, and she shifted targets.

“Although this incident was rather unexpected, Father’s safety is welcome news,” she said, swallowing her bitterness. “It doesn’t change that Delunio united with Eastern Levetia and attacked my homeland, though. Wouldn’t you agree, Lady Caldmellia?”

“Indeed,” she answered with a lively smile. “And, Sir Mullein, you assert that King Lawrence took the initiative, yes?”

“Y-yes, that’s right.” Mullein nodded nervously. Like the others, he was stunned by the battle’s outcome, but his focus was still primarily on Lawrence. The accused king was uncomfortably silent.

“Is this true, King Lawrence?”

Mullein rushed to answer in his stead. “Lady Caldmellia, I speak the tru—”

“I am asking King Lawrence.”

Caldmellia brushed Mullein aside to look at Lawrence.

“…”

The king lifted his head, and looked to Mullein, Tolcheila, and Caldmellia in

turn. He took a deep breath as if to quell his nerves.

"No, it's not."

It was a concise, explicit denial.

"…Your Majesty! It's pointless to make excuses! Please accept your responsibility as king!"

Mullein shamelessly clung to his lie. Caldmellia snickered as the king and prime minister played the blame game.

"You misunderstand," Lawrence said, his weighty voice cutting past Caldmellia's laughter. "I wasn't talking about my role in the matter."

All present looked puzzled. Lawrence gathered all his power and delivered a revelation.

"You are mistaken to believe we sided with Eastern Levetia in the first place."

The room trembled.

Everything started when Delunio approached Eastern Levetia. Caldmellia used this as a point of criticism. Delunio could escape if it managed to override that justification.

"…Are you certain of that, King Lawrence?"

Caldmellia, of course, had no intention of letting Delunio flee. Her eyes bore into the king with an intensity not for the faint of heart.

"We have already confirmed a connection between Delunio and Eastern Levetia. Are you suggesting there's been some error?"

"Exactly." Lawrence's hands trembled, but his voice was fluid. "And I have proof… Enter." His eyes went to the door.

Everyone followed his gaze, and the door opened as though on cue.

"I am here per King Lawrence's request."

Several people entered, led by a girl.

"I am Falanya Elk Arbalest. I shall attend the rest of this meeting."

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Lawrence spat curses from his solitary, dim chamber the day before the meeting.

"Damn it! What the hell is going on…?!"

He thought back to the incident in the audience hall.

Caldmellia scorned Delunio and leveled false accusations.

Tolcheila conspired with her.

And Mullein belittled his king.

As Lawrence envisioned each face, rage built within the pit of his stomach. What should be done about those loathsome three? Tear them limb from limb with his own hands, perhaps? Yes, he was the king, after all. It would be simple…

"…"

However, no sooner did the thought occur to him than his anger withered and vanished. Lawrence watched the door out of his room.

Several guards stood watch outside. Their duty was to keep Lawrence inside, retrieving him only when necessary. He had no say in the matter. After all, it was Mullein they obeyed.

"What could *I* ever tear apart…?"

Self-derision crashed upon him. Lawrence couldn't even handle a few guards confining him. No amount of anger would liberate him.

"And I call myself a king…?"

He'd been under house arrest for what felt like days with no news of the outside world. How were the war with Soljest and negotiations with Caldmellia going? His anxiety spiraled high. However, Lawrence also knew he was powerless to help, regardless of his situation. He'd been a mere puppet king since Sirgis's reign and lacked the nerve to reclaim his authority despite his displeasure with that.

It was inevitable that he remained a ruler in name only after Sirgis's fall. Someone content as a pawn couldn't be expected to suddenly lead an entire nation. Still, Lawrence always told himself he *wanted* to change…

"…?"

A light breeze brushed the king's cheek, and he looked up.

The window was closed.

Lawrence surveyed the room, wondering where the wind had come from. That's when he noticed another human shadow in the room.

"Who are…?!"

"Please keep silent, Your Majesty."

A familiar voice hushed Lawrence's instinctive yelp of surprise. Upon closer inspection of the newcomer's silhouette, Lawrence was twice baffled.

"S-Sirgis…?!"

"It's been some time, Your Majesty."

The man offering a polite bow was none other than Sirgis, the former prime minister of Delunio.

"H-how did you get in here…?"

“I never mentioned this before, but there is a hidden escape route in the event of an emergency.”

Sirgis motioned to the space behind him. What was once a wall had opened to reveal a passageway.

“Yuan informed me that Your Majesty’s room has not changed, which was a great help. Even so, the effort took quite a toll on me in my present state.”

Lawrence noted Sirgis’s poor complexion. Sweat covered his forehead. How much agony was the man enduring?

“Sirgis, those wounds…”

“Your Majesty, we have more pressing concerns,” Sirgis said. “I will be frank… At this rate, Mullein will blame you for everything, and you’ll be overthrown.”

“…!” Lawrence gulped.

“Princess Tolcheila and Lady Caldmellia have pushed Delunio into a corner. Mullein has no options left, so he will most likely offer Your Majesty’s head to Levetia to protect himself.”

“Th-that’s ridiculous! Mullein is the one handling our nation’s politics! Plus, I’m Delunio’s king! H-how could he possibly offer my head?!”

“I understand how you feel. However, Mullein doesn’t care, and as king, Your Majesty holds full responsibility for whatever befalls Delunio.”

Lawrence’s expression twisted. He tried to protest but gave up when he couldn’t find the words. He understood what Sirgis was saying. Delunio was in dire straits, and Mullein was not above taking desperate measures.

“What’s going on…? How did things turn out this way?!” Lawrence pleaded tearily, voice choked from anguish. “It was you, Sirgis! This is all *your* fault! This is because you were the prime minister! Because you disappeared!”

Lawrence raised a tight fist. Sirgis flinched briefly but willed his body to stay. He had to accept the blow. It was his duty.

The hit never connected, though.

“…No, I know it’s not your fault.” Lawrence slowly lowered his arm. He seemed utterly lost. “It’s mine. I’ve had countless opportunities to change, and I’ve known kind and thoughtful vassals. Still, I did nothing. I ran away at the slightest hint of trouble and took the easy way out…”

Lawrence held his head in both hands and sobbed.

“Why am I like this? All the regret in the world is pointless now.”

“…”

Sirgis couldn’t say anything. He felt like he had no right to speak and ease

Lawrence's pain. And so to heal the king's heart here in this moment…

"It's not pointless."

…a new voice spoke from behind Sirgis. Startled, Lawrence looked up and spied a young girl.

"P-Princess Falanya…?!"

Princess Falanya of Natra stood before him.

"King Lawrence, you're not too late. Delunio is in the midst of a crisis, but there's still hope."

"Wh-what are you saying? That's impossi—"

"No, Your Majesty. Princess Falanya speaks the truth," Sirgis cut in. "We have called upon you tonight to propose a solution."

"What? N-no, wait…" Confusion, disbelief, doubt, and a mix of other emotions swirled in Lawrence's heart. As he tried to brush these aside, Falanya stepped forward.

"Your Majesty, do you truly wish to change?"

"…"

Although she was still young, the king felt her radiate with undeniable power.

"If you wish to change, let's start here. First, we can conquer your hesitation." Falanya's tone was affectionate. "I used to feel the same frustration as I mourned my own powerlessness. To move past this, I had to step forward and find my own strength."

Lawrence gulped.

He sensed no devilish trickery in the young girl's eyes. Their direct, reassuring presence was like a torch in a dark wasteland.

"Can I…really change?"

The words slipped out unbidden, and Falanya smiled.

"This is the first step. Come, take my hand."

Falanya reached out. Lawrence wavered, fretted, pondered—then took it.

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"Princess Falanya…?!"

Tolcheila's and Mullein's eyes went wide.

Natra's Crown Princess Falanya.

As a guest of honor at the ceremony, she should have been entirely uninvolved in this matter. Why was she here? Tolcheila and Mullein were ignorant of Lawrence and Falanya's rendezvous the day before and couldn't

begin to comprehend the reasoning.

However, further surprises awaited them. When Mullein looked behind the princess, he couldn't contain his astonishment.

"Sirgis and…Yuan?!"

The former prime minister of Delunio and a runaway member of Eastern Levetia. The two entered the room to join Falanya.

"What in the world is… No, it doesn't matter! Guards! Arrest that man! He's the ringleader who infected our nation with Eastern Levetia's paganism!" Mullein ordered.

The flustered guards did as they were told and rushed forward, but…

"Silence!"

…Sirgis's rebuke stopped them in their tracks.

"Did you not hear King Lawrence? Delunio siding with Eastern Levetia is an utter fabrication! There is no reason to arrest him!"

The guards exchanged looks. The orders of the prime minister. The insistence of the king. The command of a former prime minister. They had no idea who to follow.

Caldmellia sighed. "I find this hard to believe. Are you suggesting we simply accept Natra's verbal testimony that he and his kind are not of Eastern Levetia?"

Levetia claimed Yuan and his comrades belonged to Eastern Levetia. Delunio asserted they weren't. The current issue was not a matter of who was right. This was a political tug-of-war to determine who held greater influence. Delunio had just upped its game by convincing Natra to agree with its side.

Nevertheless…

"That is not enough," Caldmellia flatly rejected. "Even if a single nation like Natra declares otherwise, the Teachings of Levetia shall not accept such statements."

As a failing society, Delunio's political authority was minimal. In addition, Natra was evolving by leaps and bounds but couldn't yet claim to be a superpower. There was also the touchy matter of the north's cool attitude toward Levetia. A Natra and Delunio team up wasn't enough to sway the Church's opinion.

"Well then, what if the other nations agreed?" Falanya gathered the room's attention with her remark. With all eyes upon her, she produced a letter. "This missive proves those labeled as being of Eastern Levetia are instead people sent to Delunio by their homeland. And the one to endorse this claim is—"

Falanya raised the letter up high for all to see. The contents were exactly as she said, and everyone gasped when they saw the signature at the bottom.

"Prince Miroslav of Falcasso?!"

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It all happened before Delunio and Soljest came to blows. To the far south lay the warmest region, excluding the Patura Islands, the Falcasso Kingdom.

The country suffered under the constant threat of the Empire and clashed with its neighbor on multiple occasions.

The Falcasso, perhaps owing to the climate, were said to be a peaceable people, but the majority of the populace considered the Empire a sworn enemy.

"To think there'd come a day we'd invite an Imperial royal to our nation."

"I must admit I never imagined I'd be here as a messenger."

A man and woman sat across from each other in one of the rooms of the Falcasso palace. One was Falcasso's Prince Miroslav. The other was Lowellmina, princess of the Earthworld Empire.

"In any case, the weather here is delightfully pleasant. I daresay it's nothing like Natra to the north."

"Even shadows freeze there, right? I hear the silver landscape is breathtaking in winter, though."

"It's certainly a sight worth seeing, though I'm afraid I can't recommend braving the bitter cold for such a trip."

"I've got high endurance, so I'll be fine." Miroslav's lips curled up. "Still, it'll be tough to go anywhere while my uncultured, barbaric neighbor continues acting up."

"My goodness, who knew you had such a horrid country close by? Perhaps our empire should take them in and rescue them from the wretched woes of small-time governance.

Lowellmina and Miroslav laughed together, although there was no mirth in their eyes.

"Spending a fine moment with such a lovely woman is one of life's many joys, but sadly my time is limited. Can we get to the subject at hand?"

"Impatient men aren't well-liked, you know."

"I'm well aware."

"I do hope you'll understand a woman's heart better by my next visit, Prince

Miroslav," Lowellmina said. "My business today is quite simple. I came to help you."

"Is that right? I haven't heard anything so incredible since last year."

"Oh my. And whom did you speak with last year?"

"Prince Wein at the Gathering of the Chosen."

A peculiar expression crossed Lowellmina's face. She coughed before collecting herself. "Falcasso is currently struggling from a food shortage that began last year and the spread of Eastern Levetia, correct?"

"…"

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Miroslav neither confirmed nor denied this. Lowellmina continued, unfazed.

"I have two proposals to combat these issues. First, the Earthworld Empire will export food to Falcasso."

"…Wait, are you serious?"

"Yes. Ours is a land of plenty. My faction controls a portion of our harvest, so I am able to loan you some."

"I doubt your citizens will be very happy about that."

Falcasso's animosity wasn't one-sided, after all. Countless battles had chipped away at Earthworld's goodwill.

Lowellmina's following words were even. "Indeed. Many of my citizens will protest if we sell food to Falcasso. However, trade between allied nations is a different story."

Miroslav quickly realized what she was getting at.

"Hold on. You don't mean…"

"Take Patura, for example! The Empire's citizens have no quarrel with its people now that we've become allies thanks to ***my*** impressive, most marvelous feat. Should the archipelago have an occasional surplus of food and export it, I doubt the Empire would even notice."

In short, the Empire would launder food to Falcasso through Patura.

Miroslav groaned at Lowellmina's underlying intention. Yes, her plan was entirely feasible.

"I have one more proposal. Eastern Levetia has been giving your nation grief lately, has it not? You're frustrated, I'm sure. Yet no matter how you oppress the followers, they scatter like baby spiders, only to return later. What if you establish a limited sector where Eastern Levetia is free to operate?"

"Don't be ridiculous! Levetia will never recognize Eastern Levetia!"

"I know. That's why it would be strictly unofficial. Eastern Levetia is also aware you have a position to uphold. If you promise them an informal region where they are allowed to practice, you can make Eastern Levetia devotees vow to follow those guidelines." Lowellmina gave a luminous smile. "If you accept these proposals, Prince Miroslav, both your food shortage and religious troubles will be taken care of! It's a marvelous deal! It would be pure madness to let such a chance slip away."

It was absurd yet undeniably tempting. However, that put Miroslav on edge.

"…So, what do you want?"

"What do I want? I'm only trying to help."

"Cut the crap. Just tell me. What do I have to do?"

Miroslav's harsh insistence forced Lowellmina to answer.

"Will you strike my two brothers for me?"

"…You mean Bardloche's and Manfred's armies?"

Both were far from Falcasso, but Miroslav knew they were butting heads.

"My brothers are only pretending to fight. They have no intention of warring. Their soldiers have realized this as well, and morale is fading fast. The damage will be substantial if their forces are ambushed now."

"A surprise attack won't work if they can see us coming."

"They won't see you," Lowellmina asserted. "My brothers have underestimated Falcasso and believe you won't make a move. You're dealing with famine and a religious conflict, and more importantly, you're still in the middle of a power shift after a great king. Frankly, they look down on you."

"…"

Lowellmina watched Miroslav turn angry. This fury wasn't directed at her but at his own worthlessness. He understood that he didn't have the clout to be held in any sort of regard.

"If you strike my brothers, you'll earn the renown you so desire," Lowellmina whispered sweetly. "As for justification, claim my brothers pretended to fight to hide their real plan to invade Falcasso. You only attacked first out of caution. The part about their charade is genuine, and considering how often the Empire has attacked Falcasso in the past, such intentions sound quite plausible."

Lowellmina's crafty rhetoric flowed like a song.

"If you strike the loathsome Earthworld Empire and deal a hard blow, your people will praise you. Plus, the Empire will recognize you as a formidable enemy, and you'll have more influence in the West. When the time comes for you to attack Bardloche's and Manfred's armies, I swear on my own name that the main Imperial army waiting on standby will not respond."

"……"

Only a demon could exploit human weakness and desire so precisely. How was someone like Lowellmina even produced? To Miroslav, this woman was as dangerous as Prince Wein.

Despite knowing the peril, the prince couldn't resist the temptation.

"…Selling food to the enemy and demanding I attack your countrymen. Now I know what the face of high treason looks like."

Miroslav extended his hand.

"Whether I am remembered as a traitor or a forward-thinking patriot is for

history to decide. However, if you ask me—no one loves the Empire more."

Lowellmina reached out as well. The two shook firmly, solidifying their secret pact.

"…Oh yes. I have one last request," Lowellmina added as though remembering something. Miroslav frowned. "I hear Eastern Levetia has a presence in Delunio as well, but it seems to be in a precarious position. Could you kindly declare they are Falcasso citizens you sent?"

"…What the heck? Why should I do something like that?"

Lowellmina didn't blame Miroslav for his bemusement. However, this was one of the conditions Wein mentioned in his letter.

"This is for your benefit, Prince Miroslav. If Eastern Levetia starts to proselytize heavily in the West, Levetia will take action before long. I wouldn't be surprised if Eastern Levetia followers were expelled from the West entirely. Your Eastern Levetia district plan will be in trouble if that happens."

"Ngh…"

If there was a movement to expel Eastern Levetia worshippers, Falcasso would have no choice but to follow suit. However, there was no way to eliminate every devotee in the West. This was especially true for Falcasso, which bordered the East. There was constant foot traffic on an average day, and Eastern Levetia members banned from the West would undoubtedly be more determined than ever to set down roots in Falcasso.

"We'll both turn a blind eye to buy time. What do you think?"

"All right. But I'm only confirming their citizenship. Nothing more."

"That will suffice. You have my gratitude, Prince Miroslav."

Lowellmina felt immense relief now that she'd fulfilled Wein's condition.

Now I just have to send a letter from Miroslav… But what's all this for?

The princess couldn't even begin to imagine, but she was almost certain Wein's aim was to ruin someone's day. Lowellmina's thoughts turned to her distant friend.

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And now, let us return to the present.

"…There's no way!" Tolcheila was livid. "Why would Falcasso send people out here?! That letter is a fake!"

Her reaction was justified. To those unaware of the situation, Falcasso had appeared out of nowhere.

"This handwriting…is authentic." Despite this sudden upset, Caldmellia remained calm. As director of the Gospel Bureau, she conducted various correspondences and was familiar with Miroslav's script.

"…! Are you saying you accept this?! That they aren't with Eastern Levetia?!"

Tolcheila wouldn't stand for it. She'd seized her opportunity after spying a connection between Eastern Levetia and Delunio, but she had no excuse to criticize the latter if the link proved false. Now that Gruyere had the Soljest throne back, losing Delunio spelled total failure.

"Yuan, was it?" Caldmellia's eyes locked on the missionary. "Is this letter true?"

"Yes. We are not Eastern Levetia members but Falcasso citizens sent by Prince Miroslav."

Yuan gave a distinguished bow as he lied through his teeth. He glanced at Falanya beside him and noticed her pained expression. He gave a small smile.

It's all right, Princess Falanya.

Prior to this meeting, the princess spoke with Yuan.

"Yuan, I'm afraid you'll have to lie about your convictions for this plan to work. Will you be okay?"

"Of course. I'll do what I must."

"…I'm not pious myself, but I understand those who are don't take lying about their faith lightly. I'll find another way if it starts to feel like too much, so please don't force yourself."

Yuan wasn't putting up a brave front. This was for the good of Eastern Levetia. There was no shame involved.

Still, Falanya's conscientiousness touched his heart.

Even I wouldn't really consider myself "pious"… But Princess Falanya's support is definitely part of God's divine plan.

And so Yuan would spread pure lies on this grand stage.

"If you are still uncertain, please feel free to contact our homeland. We are devout followers of Levetia who serve the Holy Elite Miroslav."

Mentioning a Holy Elite gave Yuan's words new gravitas. The Holy Elite were a unique existence within Levetia. A slight against them was a slight against the Church.

"My, this is quite the conundrum," Caldmellia muttered.

She could easily crush Delunio on its own, and even Natra's interference was no trouble for her. However, it was different if Falcasso endorsed both countries. Claiming people sent by Holy Elite Miroslav were from Eastern Levetia was akin to challenging the prince. Falcasso was the West's first line of defense against the Empire. Appeasing him was a common practice.

Well, that's precisely why it doesn't hurt to try.

Caldmellia wasn't sure how Miroslav was roped into this, but he'd likely withdraw if she pressed the issue here. There was a chance she was wrong and everything would spiral into a disaster, but that would make the situation more entertaining.

However, my role is minor this time. I've already collected my fee, so perhaps I should leave the rest to her.

Having reached this conclusion, Caldmellia turned to Tolcheila.

"Princess Tolcheila, I believe both this letter and Yuan's claim are authentic. What do you think?"

"Wha…?!"

Caldmellia was tacitly announcing Levetia would bow out if Tolcheila couldn't turn things around.

"You mean Levetia will just accept their idiotic story…?!"

"You speak out of line, Princess Tolcheila. Dismiss the direct testimonial of a Holy Elite as 'idiotic' and appropriate measures shall be taken."

"N-Ngh…!"

Tolcheila ground her teeth with such force that one might expect blood to spurt from them.

Her plan had been flawless. One more step and she would've had Soljest's throne and part of a dissected Delunio. Now she stood to lose it all at the final moment.

"…Hold on! Then why did you lie about being from Eastern Levetia?!" Tolcheila shouted at Yuan. "I heard you back at the ceremony. You said you were with Eastern Levetia! Nearly the entire room heard it. What was the point of that if you actually serve Miroslav?!"

Even if Falanya's group tried to mask the truth with lies, there were bound to be gaps. Tolcheila caught one and jumped on it mercilessly.

However, Falanya had taken that into account. "That was to excise troublesome elements from Delunio, of course."

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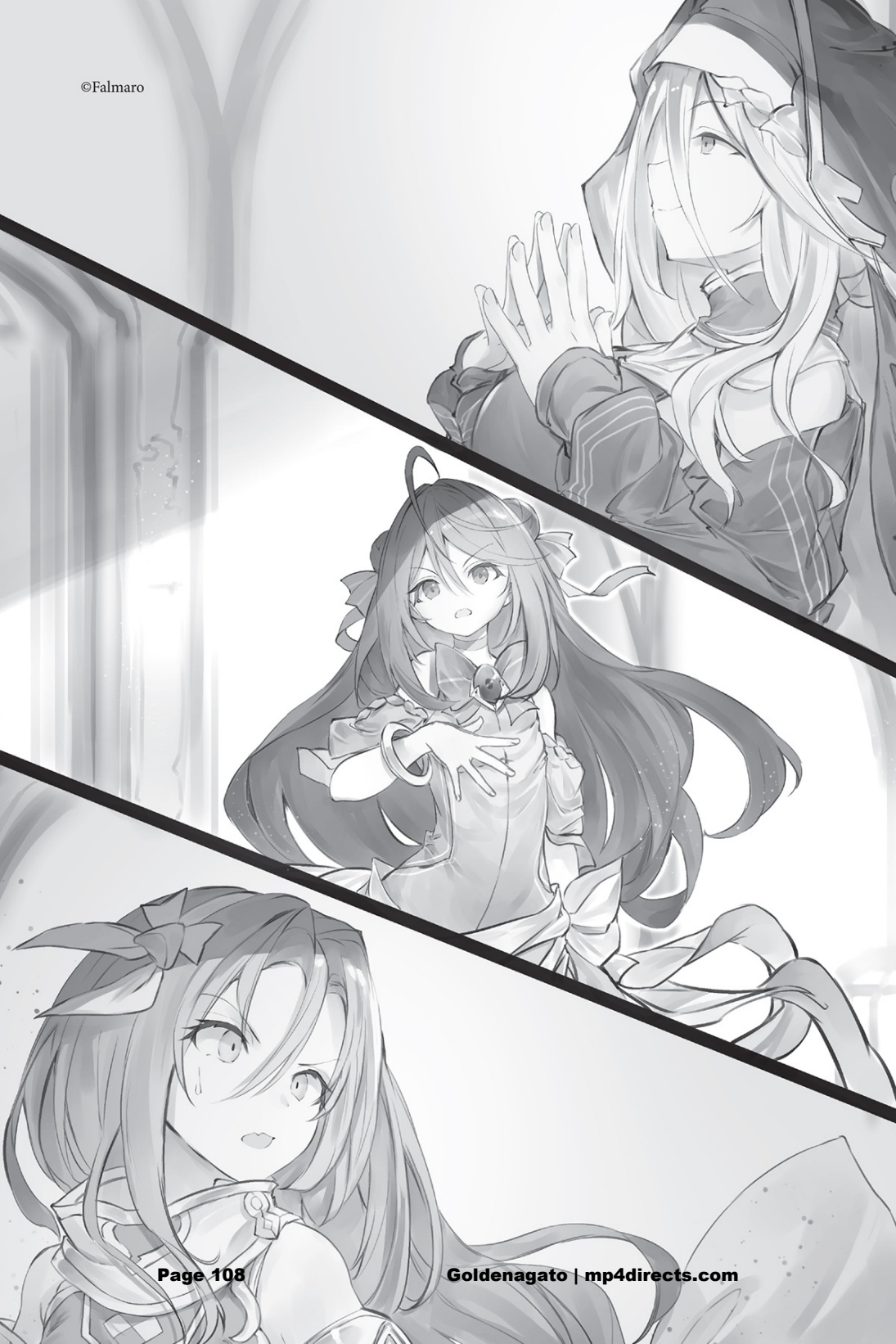

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Caught off guard, Tolcheila widened her eyes. Falanya cast her a sidelong glance.

"For some time now, King Lawrence has been certain there are some within Delunio who would disrespect the nation, its citizens, and Levetia in pursuit of their own goals. Therefore, the king had Prince Miroslav send people here to be treated like members of Eastern Levetia to draw out zealous rebels who would cause havoc!"

Falanya paused to raise her voice.

"Isn't that right, Prime Minister Mullein?!"

"Wha…?!"

Mullein's face trembled, and Falanya came down on him hard.

"You approached Yuan with no knowledge of this! And even though he introduced himself as a member of Eastern Levetia, you dared to accept his financial support and reap the benefits! Furthermore, you took advantage of the trouble in neighboring Soljest and deceived Princess Tolcheila. King Lawrence's fight to stop you was futile, and you invaded an allied nation to further your aim! Your actions betray your country, people, religion, and everything else!"

"Y-you're wrong! I would never!"

"No matter your reason, the truth is that Delunio invaded Soljest! Proper reparations must be made! Fortunately, Natra is willing to act as an intermediary, and King Gruyere has already agreed to a meeting! As long as the culprit, Mullein, is justly punished for his crimes, that is!"

It was all a bluff. Gruyere hadn't agreed to anything yet, but no one present could fact-check the claim. Furthermore, Falanya's speech suggested the situation would resolve itself nicely if Mullein's head were put on the chopping block.

This was a power game. If the issue remained domestic, Lawrence's lack of authority ensured he'd be ignored no matter how much he criticized Mullein. However, when foreign nations like Natra and Soljest backed him up and agreed Mullein was guilty, the scales tipped in Lawrence's favor.

"Guards!" Sirgis shouted. "Princess Falanya is right! This upheaval is entirely the work of Mullein! Arrest him!"

"Y-you must be kidding!" Mullein yelled. "Sirgis! What authority do you have over me?! *I'm* the prime minister of Delunio!"

"…Not anymore," Lawrence declared gravely, eliciting a cry of horror from Mullein. "From this moment forward, you are relieved of your duties. You will be a powerless, common criminal."

“P-please wait, Your Majesty! You misunderstood! I would never try to accuse you!” Mullein pleaded vehemently, but the guards ran over and pinned both his arms.

“Stop! L-let me go! Damn it, Lawrence, are you really going to allow this?! Sirgis! Shame on you for blaming others!”

“…Take him.”

The guards obeyed the king’s orders and dragged the struggling Mullein away. His indignant screams could be heard outside the conference room, and it was only after the door closed that silence returned.

“…Please forgive my unsightly behavior,” Sirgis apologized.

“No, that was a marvelous performance,” Caldmellia replied with a giggle. “I understand your point now. It was rather a roundabout method…he-he. But sometimes that is simply what happens in the web of government affairs.”

Caldmellia made it clear she fully accepted Delunio’s claims.

That left one last person.

“What do you think, Princess Tolcheila?” Caldmellia asked.

“……”

Tolcheila failed to answer.

Falanya…Maybe I was wrong to underestimate her…

Tolcheila had no way of knowing how Gruyere escaped confinement and defeated both armies. But based on what just happened, she was positive Falanya was somehow involved.

If only the princess of Natra were alone. Then Tolcheila might have stood a chance. She had a hunch one more person was working in the shadows.

I was disappointed he couldn’t make it to the ceremony, but somewhere in my heart, I was relieved! I thought it meant he couldn’t ruin my plan!

She’d been sorely mistaken, though. It was a mistake to disregard that unrivaled genius for even a moment.

Did you crush my plans without stepping one foot outside the country, Wein Salema Arbalest…?!

It was frustrating. Infuriating. Maddening. Yet no matter how she mourned, the outcome wouldn’t change. Tolcheila had issued a challenge and lost.

“Very well. I accept it.”

Everyone in the quiet room heard Tolcheila’s almost inaudible whisper. And thus, the maelstrom that visited the Delunio Kingdom drew to a close.

Epilogue

Back in the Imperial Palace, Lowellmina lazily sprawled across the sofa in her office.

“Blaaargh.”

She acted like a tame pet, adorable but not at all dignified. Fyshe stared at her lady and sighed.

“Your Highness, please try to look a bit more presentable.”

“But I caaaan’t. I’m in burnout mooode,” Lowellmina whined like a spoiled child.

Fyshe would normally utter a few words of complaint and stand her ground, but her rebuke was half-hearted this time. The princess’s lethargy was understandable after everything that happened. Between her secret meeting with Prince Miroslav, meeting with Eastern Levetia, and preparing food for exports to quell the riots the Imperial princes incited across the Empire, there was hardly time to rest.

The rendezvous with Miroslav was especially taxing. Lowellmina took an unfamiliar sea route to Falcasso to avoid her brothers’ notice, but it still meant moving through enemy territory.

Moreover, since the visit was unofficial, there was a chance it could have ended up like this:

Thanks for coming. Prepare to die. Hah!

“Gweh.”

Lowellmina’s mental and physical breakdown was no surprise at all. Thankfully, the princess’s success made it all worthwhile.

“Your Highness, I understand how you feel. However, now is our best opportunity to act. We’ve received reports on this most recent battle, and it appears that both princes have suffered significant losses.”

Fyshe held out several documents that Lowellmina accepted listlessly. She

scanned them with obvious irritation.

"Hmm… I already heard the basic details."

Miroslav and his forces attacked Bardloche and Manfred just as Lowellmina had suggested. Caught off guard by this unexpected enemy, both sides sustained significant damage. As the mightiest armies on the continent, they were stubborn and struck back, but Miroslav's forces quickly withdrew.

"Falcasso hurried home after hitting the Empire and earning prestige. Miroslav seems like a hot-headed fellow. I'm impressed he followed the plan to the letter."

"It seems the prince's citizens are praising his name to the heavens."

"That's no surprise. And apparently, my brothers have finally called off their useless staring contest and retreated. I'm sure both feel like they ought to be wearing mourning veils. Hmm…"

Lowellmina pondered something as she spoke. Not wishing to interrupt, Fyshe watched quietly. Finally, the princess shared her thought.

"Yes, this may indeed be an excellent opportunity."

"What do you mean?"

"We will end this battle for inheritance within the year."

Fyshe was thunderstruck. "Y-Your Highness, isn't that much too soon?"

"No, considering my brothers' current state, it's well within the realm of possibility. Bardloche and Manfred will try to recover quickly and might gain the upper hand if we idle. We need to crush them first."

Fyshe gulped. They were in the usual office, and Lowellmina was her typical self, but it felt like history was being made.

"Well then, Your Highness…"

Lowellmina smiled at her subordinate's uneasy words.

"This will be a grand battle to determine whether I am the first Empress in Earthworld Empire history…or fade into obscurity."

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Footsteps echoed down the chilly stone corridor.

In the Empire's main cathedral of Eastern Levetia, Yuan the missionary bowed to the few adherents he passed before arriving at a massive door in the innermost sanctum. A chapel lay beyond.

“Great Pontiff, I have returned.”

“Ah, Yuan,” a man replied. He was the head of Eastern Levetia.

“I heard the news. It seems our brethren have weathered an arduous trial.”

“Yes. However, we were able to overcome it safely.”

“I wish I could reward you with a well-deserved rest for your trouble…but I’m afraid I must ask more of you.”

“I am at your service,” Yuan replied with a reverent bow.

“You’ve heard about the recent agreement with Princess Lowellmina to restrict Falcasso’s Eastern Levetia population to a small region, correct?”

“Yes. Although it may help our members to escape persecution, it will be more difficult to reach the spiritually starved citizens.

“There is no cause for worry. Our presence is already well known in Falcasso. The destitute will instinctively flock to us.” The pontiff paused for a moment. “I am more interested in what we have gained from this change. That is, the opportunity to meet Prince Wein of Natra through Princess Lowellmina’s mediation.”

“I see…”

Wein Salema Arbalest, the benevolent ruler of the north.

There was a small community of Eastern Levetia faithful in Natra, but most kept their distance since Wein’s religious leanings were more Western. Furthermore, the nation never held much value.

However, all that had changed. It was well understood Wein took a pragmatic approach to religion, and Natra as a whole was evolving. Eastern Levetia could benefit from a relationship, which was why Yuan used Delunio to get a foot in the door.

“I would like you to go there and seek an audience. I had additional candidates in mind, but your connection to Princess Falanya is beneficial.”

“Please leave it to me. I shall not betray your trust.”

The pontiff gave a satisfied nod, then whispered grimly, “The tumult in the Empire is at its zenith, and the West is certain to respond. We must hold true if we seek the glory beyond the storm.”

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“Fwaaah…”

Back in her mansion in the Delunio capital of Liddell, Falanya collapsed across a desk.

“You seem weary, Your Highness,” Ninym remarked with a smile. She came to Delunio as a secret messenger but was presently acting as her aide.

The tumultuous meeting had adjourned, but it wasn’t like everything was resolved. Actually, each answer seemed to lay the groundwork for another problem.

Between writing up a report for Wein, contacting King Gruyere, and speaking with King Lawrence about their next steps, Falanya was too busy to return home.

“Persistence despite exhaustion will only dull the mind. Why not take a short recess?”

Ninym could already hear Wein’s indignant protests. *What?! You’re* ***way*** *nicer to her!* But she banished him from her thoughts.

“I’d really love to, but I’m almost finished. Anyway, this is something only I can do. I won’t give up!”

Falanya patted her cheeks with fresh vigor while Ninym watched in admiration.

“I’d love to hear those same words from certain slackers.”

“‘Certain slackers’? Who?”

Ninym giggled. “Yes, who indeed?”

There was a knock on the door, and a man entered. It was Sirgis. His wounds had finally healed, and he was able to walk again.

“Might I have a word, Your Highness?”

Falanya nodded, and Sirgis’s eyes shifted to Ninym.

“Well then, I shall prepare for our return to Natra.” Ninym took the hint and gave the two some privacy, excusing herself with a bow. Once her footsteps faded, Sirgis spoke.

“I’ve just met with King Lawrence. Those close to Mullein will be dismissed alongside him. Delunio’s vassals will be returned to their stations.”

“That’s wonderful news. For both of us,” Falanya said before skipping to the more significant matter. “So, Sirgis, what will you do? King Lawrence asked you to stay here, right?”

Sirgis nodded and spoke as if his mind were elsewhere. “It’s as you’ve surmised. Delunio is my homeland. We’ve eluded danger, but this nation’s suffering remains. I sense I am still needed.”

“…”

“However, I made a promise to you. I vowed to serve you wholeheartedly once this crisis ended, Princess Falanya. Besides, although clumsy, King

Lawrence demonstrated resolve at that meeting. I'm certain such spirit will uplift Delunio in my absence."

Sirgis knelt and lowered his head with masterful grace.

"From this moment forward, whenever Your Highness is distraught, I shall bleed with you. Whenever you are joyous, I shall spill tears with you. It is an honor to pledge my devotion, and I vow to serve you until these bones return to the earth. If you believe I am qualified to be your shadow, please accept this oath."

There was no question Sirgis meant every word. Overcome with nerves and emotion, Falanya took a single deep breath.

"…I accept."

Both sensed the tangible bond this brief, succinct response created between them. It was invisible, and there was no written evidence, yet this promise was unbreakable as long as there was mutual respect.

"Now that I am your true vassal, there is something I must tell you, Princess Falanya." With fire in his heart, Sirgis made what might be his final counsel.

"What is it?"

"I have been covertly plotting to install you on Natra's throne, Princess Falanya."

"…" Falanya's expression was serene. She closed her eyes for a few moments, steadied her mind and breath, then spoke slowly. "I've heard rumors of such a scheme."

"…"

"Is it revenge against Wein?"

"That was the initial reason, yes."

She sighed at Sirgis's confession, though from relief, not disappointment.

"Your actions were wrong, but I'm glad you told me."

Falanya smiled. To her, this was a show of repentance and a first step toward their new life as master and servant.

"You've given that up now that I have your loyalty, correct?"

"No."

Sirgis's answer unnerved the girl.

"Princess Falanya. This recent incident has made it clearer than ever. You are fit to rule Natra."

"Wha?!" Falanya exclaimed. "Sirgis, do you realize what you're saying?!"

After swearing vassalage to her, his first words were a declaration of vengeance against Wein. Falanya could renounce him on the spot, and he would

have no room to complain.

"Prince Wein has been at the forefront of Natra's development. Without him, it would have been consumed by the East or West. The people laud his accomplishments; he rules with benevolence, justice, and love; and many are convinced they will prosper under his protection."

"That's right. What is there to complain about?"

"Surely you've noticed it, too, Princess Falanya. Were Prince Wein truly so kind, I would never have spoken a word against him."

"…" Falanya trembled. She knew her gentle, reliable, flawless brother was more than he seemed. "B-but, even if Wein *isn't* thinking about the good of the people—"

"Two," Sirgis cut in. "One must have one of two requirements to succeed as a politician."

"What are they?" Falanya asked.

"A love for one's citizens or need of one's country. If you love your people, you will take responsibility for them even if it doesn't award you a kingdom. Conversely, if you desire to keep your nation, you will defend it, and therefore its populace, for as long as possible. Politicians must possess at least one of these conditions.

Falanya understood the implication. "Wait, Sirgis! That's enough!"

"Prince Wein has neither."

His words pierced through the girl like a knife.

If only this were mere vilification or misdirected anger. Then she could argue and fight back without hesitation.

However, that was impossible. Falanya ached to deny Sirgis with every fiber of her being, but somewhere deep down, she understood.

Wein did not love his citizens or need his country.

"That man is a dragon who sits upon the wasteland with outstretched wings. The people are content in his shadow because they believe the dragon loves them. This is a mistake. He only remains there on a whim."

"……"

"I would not be surprised if he suddenly vanished from Natra tomorrow. Princess Falanya, I'm certain you realize the danger this would create. Natra's politics rest on Prince Wein's shoulders. How do you think the country would fare if he, if the dragon, flew away?"

Falanya envisioned a starved, suffering nation. It wasn't impossible. Even if Wein didn't run off, he might suddenly fall ill like their father. She'd considered

this more than once before. The potential was a constant threat to Natra, although it had not come to pass yet.

"In…in that case, we just have to prepare everyone! We'll teach them to survive on their own while Wein is still here!"

"That's impossible." Sirgis shook his head. "Most people are weak, Princess Falanya. They prefer to float downstream at a relaxed pace. The country will continue to rely on the dragon so long as he remains. Such was the case when Delunio invited Natra to the ceremony. The vassals initially tried to distance Prince Wein from government affairs after his authority suffered a setback, yet they called for him again at the first sign of trouble…"

"…So, you're saying I should take Wein's place? Someone like me who can't hold a candle to him?"

"Your assessment is correct when measuring skill. However, your character and charm outshine Prince Wein's. And most of all, Princess Falanya, you love Natra and every one of its citizens."

"…"

"That is the leadership your country needs. If you handle all of Natra's problems alone, the people will only learn to depend on you instead of your brother. Encourage them to resolve their frustrations, and they'll remember how to think for themselves and walk on their own."

Falanya's heart was a mess, and her breathing was ragged. She wanted to call someone who'd shut up Sirgis.

However, Falanya couldn't stop him. Sirgis's every word reminded her of an invisible path she'd been trying to ignore.

"I'm not the only one aware of this danger. Regrettably, there is only so much we can do. Walking alone in a dark wasteland is terrifying for anyone. We will need someone who can act as our light when the time comes." Sirgis's following words were clear and carried the most profound reverence. "Please become our queen, Princess Falanya. For the sake of Natra's future, we need you."

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"Lady Ninym, what shall I do about this luggage?"

"It seems that the food supply we ordered has not arrived yet."

"What route shall we take for the return journey? The leaders and nobles of several towns have expressed a desire to greet Princess Falanya."

"Yes, yes, I'll be right there."

Ninym expertly dealt with the volley of problems tossed at her.

Whether it's Wein or Princess Falanya, my duties never change.

While she mused on this, another issue came flying her way.

"Lady Ninym, there's something off about one of the carriages. We're confirming whether the axle is cracked and if it can be repaired quickly."

She headed to the storehouse on the mansion grounds where the carriage was located and spoke to the repairman.

"So, what do you think?"

"A temporary fix won't hold all the way to Natra. You're better off switching it out."

"Just when we were about to leave…"

Was it better to wait for a rough repair or save time and purchase a new buggy? The price had to be considered.

Ninym returned to the mansion, unsure of the best decision. On the way, she spotted a procession of aristocratic carriages slowly making its way past the estate.

Maybe we can borrow one of theirs?

Ninym watched the group roll by. Meanwhile…

"Ah…"

Sitting inside her carriage, Caldmellia observed those beyond the window, muttering something with curiosity.

"What is it, Lady Caldmellia?"

"Oh, nothing. I merely realized that coincidences do occur now and then." Caldmellia looked over the documents in her hand as she answered her subordinate Ibis's inquiry.

"I see. Are you truly all right with retreating so easily…?"

"I don't mind at all. I decided to spectate because it seemed entertaining. Delunio was never my primary intention. Besides, look what we have been given." Caldmellia motioned to the papers.

"I heard you came to an agreement with Princess Tolcheila, but what might those reports be…?"

"They are footprints stowed away in the Soljest palace…footprints of the Flahm."

"Footprints of the Flahm?" Ibis repeated with evident confusion.

The Flahm were an oppressed people in the West. Why did their records take priority over the fate of an entire nation?

"We cannot peer into the past directly," Caldmellia began eloquently. "However, writings left for future generations immortalize the ideas and actions of their authors. Of course, each is only a small glimpse… But once you compile and compare them to the records of various nations, organizations, and ordinary citizens, those pieces form a larger picture. Eventually, you can see the outline of what was once lost. And…ah, it's as I thought," Caldmellia said with an eerie smile. "Yes, I see. So that was their group's intention."

"Lady Caldmellia…?"

Caldmellia faced her puzzled subordinate. "There is a living descendent of the Flahm's founder out there."

The Flahm's founder.

Few understood the significance of those words, but any who did, especially those in the Levetia order, knew the incredible value.

"The Flahm's Ralei clan is tasked with guarding this hidden knowledge."

Caldmellia was unraveling a hidden history. Among the mysteries of the Flahm was a secret no one could ever know.

"Its members arrived in Natra one hundred years ago. And that living descendent is…" Caldmellia envisioned a young crown prince, then the girl who loyally served at his side. "…Ninym Ralei. She is the heart of all the Flahm on this continent…"

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King Owen of Natra decided on a certain matter. It had to be done at some point, but it was also something that had been determined long ago. It had been waiting for the right time, and the moment was here at last.

A knock came at the door.

"I apologize for my long absence, Father."

Owen's son and Natra's current de facto leader, Crown Prince Wein, entered.

"It's been a while, Wein. How've you been?"

"Thankfully, I'm feeling fine. How about yourself, Father?"

"…Lend me your ear." Wein obeyed and drew close. "Between you and me, I've been thinking I could use a wild night."

Wein chuckled.

"Don't you dare tell Falanya. She'll probably tell the guards not to let one

drop of alcohol into this room."

"A son should always support his father, but at the same time, a big brother should support his little sister. It seems I'm in quite the fix, " Wein said with a laugh. He pulled a chair to Owen's bedside. "At any rate, I'm sorry I haven't visited in so long."

"Don't worry. I was a politician for years. I know how easy it is to get wrapped up in national affairs when there are only so many hours in the day.

"Yes, I must agree. And yet my aide still pesters me each day to work harder."

"How unfortunate. Others will never understand that a king is a lone warrior."

Wein and Owen enjoyed a few more minutes of lighthearted conversation. The bond between father and son was clear as day.

"So, Father, what did you wish to speak with me about?"

At last, Wein broached the subject at hand. Owen had summoned him for a reason, after all.

"I've been mulling this over for a while, and I think it's about time."

"What do you mean?"

Owen paused for a moment before answering. "It's time I pass the crown to you."

Wein's shoulders shook faintly. Owen gave him a sidelong glance and continued.

"I tell Falanya I'm fine, but life as a devoted king is exhausting work. I doubt I'll recover enough to resume my duties."

Owen gazed at his hands. He was never an incredible physical specimen, but he'd grown gaunt since falling ill. Age played a part, too. His strength and focus were deteriorating.

Even if Owen sat on the throne again, how much longer could he valiantly rule as king?

"You've more than proved yourself as regent, and I hear your skills have been recognized both domestically and abroad. No one will object to you being king, so I shall pass it to you."

This day was bound to come since the moment of Crown Prince Wein's birth. There was a sort of forlornness in Owen's heart as he spoke, though.

"I can tell you have extraordinary resolve, Father."

Relinquishing power and passing it to the next generation was a leader's final duty, but some clung to it and refused to let go. Despite his long-term illness,

Owen didn’t shirk his responsibilities.

“However, will you first hear my request?”

Owen raised an eyebrow. “Request?” His son never asked things of him. “Well, this is a surprise.”

Wein had demonstrated a ready wit at an early age. If he wanted something, he could get it himself without bothering others.

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“Yes. It will probably be the first and last time.”

If Wein went this far, Owen, his king and father, had no choice but to listen.

“All right, what is it?”

Grimacing, Wein spoke these words:

“Father, I want you to tarnish your name for all of history.”

Multiple speculations swirled together in a race to the finish line. Future scholars came to call this era the “Great War of Kings.” A long, tumultuous year lay ahead, ready to enter the annals of history.

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Afterword

It’s nice to see you again. I’m Toru Toba.

Thank you so much for picking up *The Genius Prince’s Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt (Hey, How About Treason?)* Volume 10. As you might have already figured out, the theme this time was a two-front war! Both Wein and his little sister Falanya fought hard and dealt with conflict in their own ways. Wein’s methods need no explanation, and I hope you enjoyed seeing Falanya’s tactics and the unbelievable progress she’s made since her debut.

Anyway, it’s Volume 10! We finally hit the double digits! I’m amazed! I remember writing in the afterword of the last book that a tenth volume seemed likely, but actually reaching such a huge milestone has put me on cloud nine. I can’t thank everyone enough for their support.

At the same time, I’m panicking because I just realized the series will definitely go beyond ten volumes! I say this every time, but I toss and turn over what to write for the next one. Still, you don’t have to look hard to find series that reach twenty or even thirty volumes. What a scary industry I work in… A lot of authors out there are writing fiends.

Well then, on to my acknowledgments.

First, to my editor, Ohara. I’m sorry for always being a deadline-missing author of darkness! I’ve gotten better since the last book, so maybe I can become an author of light who keeps deadlines… Maybe…

Next, to my illustrator, Falmaro. Thank you again for the wonderful

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illustrations. This series has a lot of old men, but Falanya was front and center this time around. She looks dazzling!

Thank you to all my readers. Because of you, we've reached ten volumes and even got an anime. I hope you'll stick with me.

Emuda's manga adaptation is still a smash hit on the *Manga UP!* app. Ninym and Lowellmina look super adorable, so please check it out!

I think the wraparound on this volume mentions this, but the anime is set to broadcast in January 2022! Let's look forward to it!

It looks like we're heading for the climax. How will Wein and the others fare as each crafty power moves across the continental stage?

I don't plan on slowing down anytime soon, so please stick with me until the end! Let's meet in the next volume!

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The Genius Prince’s Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt (Hey, How About Treason?) 10
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Cover art by Falmaro

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